

# Words to God's Music

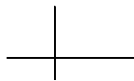
*A New Book  
of PSALMS*



Laurance Wieder



# Words to God's Music



A New Book of PSALMS

Laurance Wieder

People for centuries have been drawn to the Bible's psalms — to their beauty and power, to their music and their poetry. In *Words to God's Music* poet Laurance Wieder gives these songs of the soul a new and richly imaginative interpretation.

Many poets over the years have translated some of the psalms, but Wieder's text — contemporary without being trendy — offers a *complete* version of them. The result of Wieder's sustained inspiration, careful craft, and deep immersion in numerous versions of the psalms, *Words to God's Music* is extraordinary. These poems speak with grace and eloquence to readers of literature and readers of Scripture alike.

Wieder follows the traditional Hebrew division of Psalms into five books, with each of his 150 poems corresponding to one of the biblical psalms. This correspondence varies from poem to poem. Some of these poems live fairly close to their biblical originals; some stand as commentaries or variations on the text; some venture afield. So these are not translations or interpretations in the strictest sense. And yet they get at the heart of the psalms, with an awareness of how they speak to both the eternal and the immediate, living moment, how they speak to every reader across time and circumstance.

This is a beautiful collection, with Wieder's words set to God's music in a way that will make listening to the songs of the psalms a familiar yet freshly profound experience.



LAURANCE WIEDER, who has taught at the Yale University School of Music and at Cornell University, is a writer whose poems and essays have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Partisan Review*, *The New York Times Book Review*, *Commonweal*, *The Weekly Standard*, and elsewhere. Among his many other books are the highly acclaimed *Chapters into Verse: Poetry in English Inspired by the Bible* (with Robert Atwan) and *The Poets' Book of Psalms*.



photo by Aiah Rachel Wieder

"Linking past and present through familiar but unforgettable images, Laurance Wieder joins the ranks of master interpreters. . . . His poems throw dazzling light on the biblical psalms."

— JAMES L. CRENSHAW

"In reinterpreting the timeless for our time, Wieder has given us supple, idiomatic contemporary verse that nonetheless is infused with an ancient reverence and beauty. . . . Readers will come away with a sense of ease and clarity, enriched and refreshed by having drawn current inspiration from a very old wellspring."

— RICHARD F. SNOW



# Praise for Words to God's Music

"With great daring and skill, Laurance Wieder has transformed the Old Testament psalms into a vivid work of contemporary poetry. He captures the music of devotion and doubt that all souls sing inside themselves in all ages, refashioning the old into something new, into something eternal. This book is a sublime and unforgettable achievement. I stand in awe of its brilliance."

— PAUL AUSTER

"Suppose the psalmist were not King David or even a good shepherd but a person like you or me with a verifiable address in the twenty-first century — yet with one crucial, defining difference: he is totally articulate about the things that matter most. An ideal poet, in fact, his ego invisible, his vision clear, with nothing between him and his God but the bright blue sky. Such a psalmist is Laurance Wieder, who has a way with writ for which we should rejoice greatly."

— TOM DISCH

"Wieder's psalms bring the ancient into the contemporary with a lyricism and juiciness too often absent in modern translations, even as they retain visceral metaphors and a spacious range of emotion. . . . Plunge with delight into the freshened world of David, the sweet singer of Israel, and worship God along with Wieder."

— LUCI SHAW

"Wieder's psalms are ingeniously written and yet deeply felt, timeless and yet immediately accessible to today's readers. *Words to God's Music* sings for us all."

— R. L. STINE

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## *Words to God's Music*







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A NEW BOOK OF PSALMS

Laurance Wieder

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*Boulevard*: "Deafened" (Psalm 74); "Shake" (Psalm 77)

*Chronicles*: "Old" (Psalm 71); "First" (Psalm 146); "Hope" (Psalm 72)

*Commonweal*: "Very" (Psalm 4); "Just Below" (Psalm 8)

*First Things*: "Doubletalk" (Psalm 12); "Gifted" (Psalm 21); "Express" (Psalm 31); "For Show" (Psalm 34); "Canopy" (Psalm 63); "As If" (Psalm 73); "Come" (Psalm 80); "Open" (Psalm 81); "Inheritance" (Psalm 82); "Willing" (Psalm 85); "Of State" (Psalm 86); "Recognition" (Psalm 139); "Distinction" (Psalm 143); "Mosaic" (Psalm 144); "Who Else?" (Psalm 147)

*Pequod*: "Dumb" (Psalm 49)

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The following poems appeared in *The Poets' Book of Psalms*



(published by HarperCollins in 1995): Psalm 9, Psalm 21, Psalm 33, Psalm 39, Psalm 53, Psalm 107, Psalm 109, Psalm 118, Psalm 120, and Psalm 149.

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## *A Brief Explanation*

The Bible's Book of Psalms ranges across history, and speaks to both the eternal and the immediate, living moment. Although the Talmudic sages identify its 150 songs with ten authors, the book as a whole is attributed to the shepherd and singer King David, who was as close as anyone ever came to being perfect in the eye of God. His songs of the heart are canonical for all the major faiths and sects — Jewish, Christian, and Islamic.

Poets have been translating the Psalms for as long as poems have been written in English. Their number includes mighty if not always orthodox believers like John Milton and George Herbert, men of the world like Ben Jonson, and luminous doubters like Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Lord Byron.

Counting the Elizabethan duet of Mary Herbert and her courtier brother Philip Sidney as one, and the enthusiastic Christopher Smart, who was committed to Bedlam after repeatedly falling to his knees in the streets of London and inviting passers-by to pray with him, I am (to the best of my knowledge) only the third poet to produce a complete English version of the Songs of David.

Poets' versions differ from psalms found in translations of the Bible, and from the metrical psalms found in hymnals. Bible versions owe their first allegiance to the letter of the text, and its authority. They think about doctrine, and edition, and history even as they are being born, often in committee. Metrical psalms were written to fit received melodies for singing. They fre-

*xvii*



*A*

*Brief*

*Explanation*



quently have a sectarian cast, such as Isaac Watts's New Testament Psalms — which were answered from the Old Testament side by his friend Cotton Mather's *Psalterium Americanum*.

Poetry feeds on history, and strife, and music, on language and on that flow of minute particulars which adds up to life lived. A poem's authority derives not from tradition or legalism, but from its directness, vitality, and beauty. Sometimes to excess. The King James Version of Psalm 148:3 reads, ". . . praise him, all ye stars of light." Thomas Stanley, in his version of the same, talks to the stars directly:

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A

*Brief*

*Explanation*

Roses of gold on azure sown,  
 You sparkling jewels of the night,  
 Who silently encamp unknown,  
 Your squadrons in their tents of light;  
 Whom the militia of the skies  
 In several factions doth bestow,  
 To kindle war, which spreading, flies  
 Throughout our lesser world below —  
 Praise him by whom you shall at last be thrown  
 To earth, and forced to lay your bright arms down.

Poems also have formal qualities. Form may be the first thing that catches the reader's eye, as in Mary Sidney Herbert's version of Psalm 117:

P raise him that aye  
 R emains the same:  
 A ll tongues display  
 I ehovah's fame.  
 S ing all that share



T his earthly ball:  
 H is mercies are  
 E xposed to all:  
 L ike as the word  
 O nce he doth give,  
 R olled in record,  
 D oth time outlive.

Or a work may be so well wrought that its technique is transparent. The outward observation of traditional verse forms does not guarantee a poem's virtue, nor does an apparent freedom automatically impeach it.

Older poetry sometimes demands a lot of work to get past those conventions that encrust the living part. Spelling has always been a slippery field, even after the eighteenth century, when the letter *I* was no longer interchangeable with the letter *J*. Vocabulary and grammar shift; words and what they stand for drop out of fashion, or out of sight. Though with a little trouble, it's possible to make out both the real distress and the first verse of Psalm 102 ("Hear my prayer, O Lord, and let my cry come unto thee") in the opening lines of Thomas Wyatt's poetry paraphrase:

Lord hear my prayer, and let my cry pass  
 Unto the Lord without impediment.  
 Do not from me turn thy merciful face,  
 Unto myself leaving my government.

By the same token, contemporary speech can quickly lose its resonance and sharp looks. Through the applications of art, including tact and taste, poetry ages well. Or as Christopher Smart puts it in his version of Psalm 127,

*xix*



*A*

*Brief*

*Explanation*



If the work be not direct,  
And the Lord the fabric build,  
All the plans that men project  
Are but labor idly spilled.

In the early 1990s, I collaborated on *Chapters into Verse*, an anthology of poetry inspired by the Bible. The experience changed me. Reading unfamiliar works by familiar poets (whose Bible poems were often printed at the back of their collected works, apart from their “real” poetry), as well as otherwise neglected minor poets of scriptural rather than literary note, taught me to expect more of poetry than an aesthetic jolt. It also reminded me that didactic verse does not necessarily delight or instruct. Poetry is more musical and also knows more than prose. When it fuses music and meaning, tenderness and authority, poetry can be the written image of a shepherd and a king.

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A

*Brief*

*Explanation*

Following *Chapters into Verse*, I decided to assemble as a literary anthology the complete Book of Psalms using poets' versions. Although I had many to choose among for the more “popular” psalms — at least twelve for Psalm 23; six for Psalm 121; and sixteen for Psalm 137 — for long stretches the only possible entries were by one of the Sidneys or by Christopher Smart. To inject a little twentieth-century variety into what threatened to become an antiquarian enterprise, I translated my first psalm (Psalm 53, “The Fool Says to Himself”). Having done one, I tried doing more. Doing more, I decided to do all.

Some of these poems live fairly close to their biblical originals; others are best described as accounts in English of events in another language; others stand as commentaries or variations upon the text. To prepare, I read all the English versions, poetic and otherwise; I read Martin Luther's German and P. Hately



Waddell's Scots. I read the *Midrash on Psalms*. I did what I could with Jerome's Latin, and of course *Tehillim*. Then I wrote, usually with Mitchell Dahood's Anchor Bible *Psalms* beside the keyboard, open to the notes.

Whenever I could manage it, I made acrostics and anagrams and alphabets corresponding to those in the Hebrew. I followed the Sidneys in reducing the English alphabet to the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew (as in Psalm 119). I wrote the 18th Psalm as a miniature epic. Rather than try to improve what can't be improved, I composed a midrash on the 23rd Psalm. I divided these 150 psalms into five books, to reflect the traditional fivefold division of the Hebrew.

My father asked me recently, "What's the difference between a poem and a psalm? A psalm's a poem, isn't it?"

I answered that outwardly a psalm and a lyric poem are the same. They differ in how they speak, and to whom.

A lyric poem always happens in the first-person voice of the poet, even when the "I say" is only implicit, even if the "I" is an assumed voice and not the actual poet's.

The Bible's psalms, on the other hand, are songs of David, the singer and second King of Israel, even when composed by one of the psalmists or musicians associated with his court, because (as it says in the *Midrash*) "his is the sweetest voice of all."

Lyric poems address another person, or place, or thing. They are the occasion of speech to the beloved, to the grammatical object, to the reader. They excite admiration. When the poet's voice is heard directly, unmediated, like a voice on the other end of the phone that invites a response, then a poem lives and is understood.

The Psalms address God and the eternal. Outside of history, and beside the passage of time, the psalm waits for the reader,

xxi



A

Brief

Explanation



who speaks through the psalm, which becomes the language of the reader's heart. The psalmist asks for, complains of, praises, or repents; neither he nor those who speak with and through him expect an answer. The response is inward.

Two examples should make this plainer.

In "Ozymandias" Shelley reports, "I met a traveler from an antique land/Who said: 'Two vast and trunkless legs of stone/Stand in the desert. . . .'" Here the "I" is the poet, listening to another's first-person tale. The reader sits down with the poet and listens along. For the space of a sonnet, writer and reader inhabit the same historical moment, and participate in the same awe: "Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!" The poem is an object, with a subject.

xxii



A

*Brief*

*Explanation*

A psalm is understood differently. The psalmist's "I" escapes from history, from doctrine, and speaks for anyone and everyone who reads his lines. When I read "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want," I understand that means my shepherd, as well as David's; that the utterance holds true right now as well as in the time of Samuel; my heart says so today, and also tomorrow. "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life. . . ." To say it is to believe it. The words of the psalm become my words, too.

These psalms are not the last or only word on the Psalms, in any language. I wrote them out of the conviction that there really was poetry, as I understand the word, in the Songs of David — something more delightful than their great authority, which shines through every version.

These poems can be read along with a Bible; they can be read on their own. They are my answer to the received dissonance between sincerity and poetry, between the letter and the spirit of the law.



*Book One* ONE WILL BLOSSOM

∞ Psalms 1-41







## *The Happy One*

The happy one steers clear of lawyers,  
Steps aside for party-goers,  
Sits apart from mouthy mockers,  
Loves to learn the Lord's lore:  
He turns the Lord's laws over night and day,  
A gardener tilling holy ground.  
And the happy one will blossom  
Like the fruit trees in a watered field  
Bearing plum peach walnut pear and apple  
Cupped by green leaves the long season,  
Harvest bushels crated by the orchard.

Not the faithless. They are dead leaves,  
Clippings flattered by the wind,  
Who cannot judge themselves  
Much less the happy, and must stand  
Apart. Lord knows how  
The good make their way,  
But the bad go and come in darkness.

3



*One  
Will  
Blossom*



## 2 *Kiss It*

Why strangers rage  
For power, harvest forests massing  
Fleets like clouds  
Hulls over water,  
Uncoil lines to hoist their bellied  
Sails, singing:  
"Heave, the wind  
Will make us kings,"

4



*Book*

*One*

I can't say, but the oceans roar  
Blue laughter  
At them, of the trade  
Winds, of the seething maker  
Who said before  
And after pouring oil on the son,  
The daughter:

"Child, ask.  
It will be given: anything:  
A pot to keep  
The heavens  
In, or smash  
To earth, hopes dashed."

So I say: Time. Tie up those trains  
That trail dust:  
Kiss the child  
Come to life, or he will grow up  
Angry. Make it  
Better. Anyway,  
Flash and perish.



### 3 Yet

Lord, there are more  
Of them than of me.  
They say,  
    No help for him.

I say,  
    When I call out  
The hills rebound more  
Than an echo. You hear me.

I lay down, and sleeping  
Dreamed a crowd roared  
Around me.  
    Their teeth crack.

5



*One*

*Will*

*Blossom*



4    *Very*

Look at this!  
A circle dance  
Around a bonfire  
That won't stop,  
They swear,  
Until rain falls.  
If dance can make rain fall,  
Tears might make rain.

6

If they could see  
What fools they are,  
Their wheatfields might  
Be watered, and wine flow.



*Book*

*One*

But no.  
I sleep.  
You bring the clouds.



Here's what I think:  
 Each morning I stretch between good  
 Ways and evil thoughts,  
 Pleasure and fools who choose pain  
 For their portion.  
 Like God, I hate liars who murmur  
 Mere pleasantries, forge  
 Shackles of paper: "Do what I tell you or else  
 Taste destruction."  
 No one can destroy me with threats. Although  
 Sleeping a bad man  
 Imagines his strength has grown boundless, and I  
 The meat shoveled  
 Into his mouth, witless tool of his private design,  
 I'm not touched.  
 But that fool gets taken in by himself  
 And thrown out.

7



*One*

*Will*

*Blossom*



## 6 *Pent*

Don't hit, don't hurt me  
More, I'm shaken lower  
Than my bones could know,  
Cracked terror of God's  
Anger at my errors. So

8           What if I cried into my pillow  
              From right now until I died?  
              Would I find happiness?  
8           Do the dead decry their emptiness  
              Or sing for you, for good?

 *Book*

*One*

Scavengers mistook my tears  
For weakness: when one finger  
Stirs, the dainty vultures flap  
Their weighty feathers. Faced  
With life, they scatter.



## *Liverish*

One thing to trust the person  
Seated at my left, or right:  
That's left to chance and lions'  
Natures — they may not have  
    Right instincts, save  
To stalk, to spring, to savage.

Meek enough, but still not meat,  
I have to trust what I know  
Of another, have to show  
My sunny side, my peach  
To one I choose, or hope to touch,  
Whose heart I hope to reach.

But friends can foil, bare the tooth,  
Claw, snarl, scratch, bite when I turn  
My eye away, or when I sleep. Lord,  
Take the lion hunter and the lion  
In the pit one dug for the other.  
    Let me sing on trust.

9



*One*

*Will*

*Blossom*



## 8 *Just Below*

Although we cannot say your name  
Aloud, both earth and sky  
Hang moving pictures of your present,  
Giving children speech and strength  
To quiet even angry strangers.  
When I look at the sky, the night sky  
Moonlit, starred with patterns  
That go past me, I wonder  
What we are, that you take notice?  
Or our children, who can sing  
Songs we've forgotten? We stand  
Just below angels, who see glory,  
Honor as we do those fields, trees,  
Mountains, chasms, rivers, oceans  
You have given us sway over:  
Grazing herds and feral stalkers,  
Creatures of the house and barnyard,  
Songbirds, shorebirds, fish, whatever  
Swims or sails through the deep.  
Yet all these goods spread out  
Before us, for generations,  
Do not begin to sound one syllable  
Of what the whole earth knows  
Best left unsaid.

10



*Book*

*One*



If I could tell it all,  
 I would say thank you  
 For the toppled statues,  
 For the dusk of gods sung  
 Only in dead languages,  
 For wild grapevines tangled  
 In the timbers of a century  
 That frame our little picture  
 Of eternity. And I remember  
 There was justice, maybe, since  
 I hope the dead might be  
 Remembered, though their names,  
 Outnumbered by the stones  
 Once used to mark the exit spot,  
 Are worn down, in an alphabet  
 That can't be read aloud.

11

*One**Will**Blossom*

Not always and not ever, maybe  
 Masters will stick in the mud  
 Of what they most admired,  
 Boasting how their acts  
 Engraved in stone erased  
 Accounts of people sacrificed  
 To feed the maw, the pointless  
 Grim machinery of nations:  
 If there is something other  
 Than our selves, they will not win  
 Forever, will some time remember  
 They are human, and may even  
 Know themselves, and feel afraid.



Aloof, in hiding, Lord,  
 When schemers step out  
 From dark corners and, piling  
 What they want upon their plate,  
 Dig in? They get their way,  
 And fear no thing, the violent  
 Ones who gobble down  
 A course of blood and curses.

12



*Book*  
*One*

No longer haunting alleys,  
 Poised by open doorways,  
 He swaggers at the corner  
 In broad daylight, marking  
 Out his prey from passers-by,  
 Saying, "God looks far  
 Away, God has forgotten."

Enough. Raise your hand  
 Against them, Lord,  
 Answer those cacklers  
 Who count upon you  
 Not paying back.  
 Break off their legs, wings, hopes.  
 Let them have ours.



I trust. You can't say  
 To my soul, fly away  
 From the park  
 Bench into treetops,  
 Aiming darts at my heart.  
 I can't help what  
 The others do, but  
 I stand up straight  
 In full view. Those haters  
 Must wait for their cup  
 To be passed, and drink up.

13



*One*

*Will*

*Blossom*



Turn where?  
 Hear  
 Shark hearts, the fast  
 Talking, two-faced,  
 The beasts boast:

Truth  
 Trips and  
 Falls on

14

My lips:  
 If I say



It is so

*Book*

It is so.

*One*

If God's word be hot  
 Coal (my good thoughts  
 The embers),

Lord,  
 Stoke up a bonfire.  
 Those lip-lickers lurk  
 In the shadows  
 And eye me.



## 13 *Unlucky*

Forget me? Forever? How long  
Without smiling? How long  
Must I talk to myself, with my heart  
Heavy freight? Must I wait  
For the haters to hoot at my funeral?  
For my eyes to be draped  
With black velvet sleep death?  
Hear me, O Lord, not for me  
But for your sake,  
So the bad cannot boast  
Over me and my troubles. I trust  
You have heard me, will  
Care for me, spare me  
So I can sing songs of how long  
You remembered.

15



*One*

*Will*

*Blossom*



"There is no God."

The fool speaks from his heart  
 And bends his back  
 And sees black loam where God  
 Looks down  
 And sees no good at all,  
 Just dirt  
 Disguised as great ones, plotters  
 Selling others'  
 Fruit. But worms will turn.  
 Some day  
 The poor will wipe that proud  
 Fool's smile  
 Off his face, and pin him fast.  
 An angel  
 Wrestled Jacob to a draw.

16



*Book*

*One*



15 *Barely*

The minimum?

Say what you mean.

Do what you say.

Point no finger at another.

Welcome strangers,

Not strange dealers.

Never waver.

Feed the hungry.

Charge no interest: or

The minimum.

17



*One*

*Will*

*Blossom*



16 *Balance*

Because I said: One God, no true religion,  
And do not worship  
Money, altars, rites, and idols people  
Make to dazzle  
Certain but not self believers, nor dice  
Thrown, nor letters  
Cloaking brutal grasping, I enjoyed  
A fortune, telling  
Praises by the names of things  
And of the nameless  
Steady in the dark: at the pit's edge  
I won't teeter, ever.

18



*Book*

*One*



My heart had a visitor come in the night:  
No moonbeam in gauze robe, nor sweet-scented raptor:  
But straight-talking, heartfelt, so turn a good ear:

I've watched strong men work shovel and pickax,  
Saw, hammer, and nails. Cursed, they build steel  
Towers for others. But I call to you, and you hear.

You hear me, surrounded by goat-headed hoodlums,  
Loudmouths and lions too young to be gentle.  
I think my soft song must be better than roaring.

You heard from the shelter of apple tree shadows  
And gave me a home life, the hope of small children,  
Unbroken sleep with no thought of the others, and

Mornings I wake looking like, looking at you.

19

*One**Will**Blossom*



The strength that comes lifting weights  
 From my heart  
 Comes from the other world  
 Beyond my self:  
 Seeing the concrete city of knowing,  
 Not of dreaming.

20 Death and sadness, sex and violence  
 Lured me, scared me  
 And I called aloud to the park sky,  
 To the starless night,  
 To corner crossers, legal vendors,  
 Paper readers:



*Book*  
*One*

None heard the music God  
 Plays, that elastic  
 Being: yet the mighty other turned  
 All ear: the empty  
 Subway platform shook, oaks willowed,  
 Highways buckled.

Before me roared leviathan of old,  
 His mouth a stadium  
 Whose bleacher gates spat crowds  
 Of smoke and fire  
 Streamed between tiered clouds,  
 Whose feet

Trod the black sky, which came apart



Like sea grass  
Parts for horsemen at the gallop.  
His wings were wind.  
His tail twitched the way a stalking cat's  
Flicks side to side,

A peril to its prey. Or when neap tide  
Rolls back, and people  
Stroll on what had been the sea bed,  
We walk on secrets,  
Run for cover when with snorts and  
Flashes clouds bear down.

21



Because I just believed that I could  
Change my heart,  
Not how the other people were,  
Not when I came  
Or go from here, I didn't snarl  
Hope and fear

*One  
Will  
Blossom*

And saw a way around the trap  
Of slave life, bound  
To needless need and anger, greed,  
The appetites  
That grow the more they feed,  
A sad ambition.

I see that most of what I see's  
Inside me:  
So the merciful see mercy;  
The honest one



Finds honesty around him.  
The bad ones

Live in their own schemes,  
Duped by desires  
Cold rain can't douse, and shiver, soaked  
While others shelter  
Under the high tree and wonder  
At the storm.

22

There is a light. By its beams  
I pass through crowds  
Across the barricades, past rock,  
Up gravel paths  
With switchbacks to an overlook,  
Commanding



*Book*  
*One*

The high ground, which gently  
Slopes away,  
Where I can see whole generations  
Turn to dust  
Who have tormented me,  
And hear their cries

But need not heed them. Rumors  
Of the Lord  
Bestow more power than poetry  
Sung by an unbeliever,  
Than hours billed by lawyers  
To defend the wrong,



And I have found such temper  
In those judgments  
I have left to time, as praise gives  
To the prayer,  
Ruler over first myself,  
Then blessings:

Children, animals, a home  
To salve the sore  
Points, peevs that threatened  
Both the singer  
And his lilting, which might last  
A little more.

23



*One*

*Will*

*Blossom*



Big, shy, a schoolboy  
Canter laps around the ballfield,  
A dapple colt escaped both dam and stable  
Grazing the green theater of his being.  
To see it clearly's sweet as sunlight  
On an autumn shoulder, shining on the face  
Of harder laws than stadiums in stone.  
I learned a lot just sitting in the bleachers:  
To understand, and not mistake, my own  
Words for the breath that makes me pause.  
God, give me enough light and will

24

*Book**One*

To say just what I see,  
See what I do,  
Do what I say,  
Say what you will.



Outside the walls, a roaring crowd might be  
The sound of natural catastrophe,  
And borne as any freak of chance  
Dealt evenly, but when a mob chants  
Slogans, hates in unison, that one mind  
Thinks a hell for all who do not share  
The thought. Banners need wind  
To float. In calm, they fold and die.

I sat up straight. I spoke up quietly  
Of the unspoken name that baffles wind  
On the past's window, and hope's pillow.

25

*One**Will**Blossom*



The haves shall have and have more  
 Than they ask, will live a long time,  
 Winter in palm sunshine,  
 Watch herons fish the squall line  
 And be neither fish, nor fowl, but eye,  
 A cup to taste immensity.

26


*Book*
*One*

The others drink December polar murk.  
 They listen for the furnace switch, the pilot  
 Light, hot water pump: the damned could stick  
 No closer to their fires. Outside, the wind  
 Drives a person back into himself, where  
 All he knows is what he has imagined.



Alone. No help. But why so far?  
 To damp my roaring? Day or night,  
 Still out of earshot, tired of hearing  
 My complaint? But you're not crushed.  
 My father's father's father trusted  
 From his lamplit study, and was not  
 Unready. So I am less observant,  
 Less in learning, than the old ones. Smirkers  
 Bother now to point the finger. Teeth bared,  
 Lip curled, they shake their heads and mutter:  
 That one trusted in disorder, in the great  
 Provider: let his providence deliver him.

27

*One**Will**Blossom*

But you delivered me into the world,  
 Made hope the milk I drank, cradled me  
 Between your elbow crook and wrist,  
 Held up my head until I found my strength.  
 Support me now, when troubles  
 Ring me, paw like highland bulls, snort  
 Steam and heave fat divots with their hooves.  
 You must be near, must pick me up  
 And give me strength to save my life from bitterness.

If I have blown the horn of what I have imagined  
 To be true, it came from you. And shuddered.  
 Fear is praise to one who shows his face,  
 Who hears his name called in an empty place,  
 A name not known. Who but the meek  
 Could eat and not want more? The fat sit down



At groaning tables and remember to recall their souls.  
While every time a world ends, seeds  
Drop in the dust, then sprout, and someone  
Else is born to care for what's beyond  
Bad dreams. I live. The unborn queue.

28



*Book*

*One*



I want no shepherd when I lie  
Down, don't need to be led to water, shade  
Or rest. One who restores  
Souls can't be lost forever. Death and truth  
Are names for what we living do not  
Know, but fear as much as what may not  
Be said. No trouble now to sit  
Down with my enemy. He too must chew.  
We dip our bread in oil.  
Wine splashes over the cup's lip.  
Good within surrounds me, certain life  
Is all I ever know.


29

*One**Will**Blossom*



Jacob lay down in the waste  
And slept, dreamed, woke, and shook, and saw  
The ground he stood on had a name.

Currents on the open ocean, wells  
Below blank sand, magnetic concentrations  
Cloaked by ice, deep-space ionic winds:

30 No where is empty, full with names  
For namelessness. Get up. The door  
 Can never shut. Any door lets angels  
Go and come.

*Book*  
*One*



Raise my sights above the heads  
Of babblers, grabbers, gloaters,  
So I don't blush at the mirror;  
Let me hear and say some portion  
Of the pointed version.  
To get it right, I stumbled over laces, walked,  
Then ran. Now I want to go on farther  
And so walk again. I remember how.  
When fears bare tree limb shadows  
Stab across the picket fence, I trust  
They'll pass. I trust  
The sun will rise tomorrow. Promises,  
For children ask their parents' parents  
"What will we inherit?"  
Only to turn back to playing Fish or War,  
With no time for the answer:  
"All that's left."  
Earth's cramped by pushy phantoms:  
For them the past and what is coming pass  
As certainty. Frets maybe, for a picker  
Out of melodies that start and end "Poor me,"  
But no tune for the child of what is real.

31

*One**Will**Blossom*



Judge me, trust me,  
 Test me, weigh me,  
 Love me, for my heart's

Desire:

Hated idols, merit stealers,  
 Brushed off greedy dumbbells, dealers,  
 Washed my hands of hired

Liars.

32

Take me with the heartfelt thinkers,  
 Talkers for the truth, far seers,  
 Etchers of the royal real mover's



*Book*

Picture.

*One*



## *Attendance*

God is difficult  
To see, and near.  
What's left to fear?  
When cannibals  
Pound on my door,  
    I'm steady.  
All I ask: to live  
    In God's house,  
Soul in body,  
High ground tent pitched,  
    Singing:  
Hear me, answer.  
    I watch water,  
    Calm and stirred up  
    As a picture  
    Of your face.  
I saw and can't forget it:  
    Parents left me;  
    What I knew  
    For true stayed  
    With me,  
    So I pass  
Between my enemies  
    Like songs through trees,  
Past liars sworn against me,  
By eaters up of merit.  
    I hold my peace.  
    I learned to wait.

33



*One*

*Will*

*Blossom*



I call out to the rock:  
It calls back as a rock  
Dropped into a chasm  
Reports from the deep.

Then I picked up a stone  
For the loudmouth, the bully,  
The whey-faced cheater  
And splitter of hairs.

34



*Book*

*One*

Your stone-slinging psalm singer,  
Sweeter than centuries,  
You hear me, and feed us,  
And love us forever.



The wind draws longhand script on open water:  
One light breath scoots sparrow flocks of diamonds:  
Gales halloo, stand great waves' hair on end, flip white  
forelocks

Back that first cracked cedar timbers hewn in Lebanon,  
Pick up boulders skipped across the water, flat stones  
Thrown by seashore boys, who then return  
To watch their campfire fork, shake embers at the meteors  
Of August or December sky, sing folk songs  
About spring tides, forest days, how armies they imagine  
Rode through rain, arked animals, sat out the flood, could talk  
Of heat and light come from within, and mean it: summed  
Less than a whisper of the Lord who thunders underneath  
The backwash, in calm air.

35

*One**Will**Blossom*



Sick of not knowing what attacked me,  
I looked outside. The floating world  
Played words and pictures of my fear:  
That clutch of names taught in a dream  
Can be set down. And promises release.  
I misconstrued both strength and weakness.  
What good does anger at the dead do?  
Sharp, polished, careful phrases cut

36

The mouth no lips would kiss, and  
Playing sage or twenty questions is straight  
Poker dealt to the abyss. Preoccupied, I missed

*Book*

The top step, flapped my arms hard,  
Shouted, "God!" and caught myself. Recovered  
Balance, one of many dances clumsies do

*One*

To chance made music.



I'm here because I hated  
 Heedless worshippers of words but trust  
 A truth. I've known the eagle's and the worm's  
 Eye view, and am quite happy with one room  
 That's not a cell, have watched my muscles  
 Slack, my bones grown brittle, heard my stomach  
 Quease around an empty table. One forgotten  
 Cup crushed by the roadside, I hear them talk  
 As though I am not.

Your call, Lord. I am ashamed

For you, who might stop up their mouths with dirt  
 Who dare to puff and dandle lies about me.  
 Mercy traces hate like lightning through forked limbs  
 Scorching leaf and root: they thought God was a tree,  
 Safe shelter from the winter thunderstorms.  
 I spoke too quickly when I cried forgotten.  
 I hear my thoughts above the clamored claims  
 Upon your ear, and you reply: I trust that life  
 Lets life go on. When time's up,  
 Life lets go.

37

*One**Will**Blossom*



Guilt hidden

Maddens.

Madness:

The affront

To sense.

Innocence:

The lash, or

Rumor

38

Spurring

Candor.



Unbending

*Book*

Oaks crack,

*One*

Willows

Beside rivers

Hardly ever.



There is no new thing in God's sight.  
 (The day, the moon, are new to us.)  
 Play a new song to the Lord,  
 Glass full enough to pass along  
     Without a spill.  
     Such ink made sky black,  
     Kissed stars through pinholes, caught  
 Their night tears in a jar, each drop an ocean.

"Let be there was" — the deep mind stamped  
 A pattern on the nothing of before  
     What was to be stood forth:  
 When time, one chord, struck there  
     To now. Whatever  
     One possesses  
     Is a gift from elsewhere.  
 Inspiration comes unbidden.  
     One guessed  
 At what's inside our nature.  
 Truth stays hidden, feeds upon  
     The question.  
     Some try to steal  
 A march on death, drown fear in senses.  
 Some chosen can believe the soul is real.

*One**Will**Blossom*



Today I have to dance, hoo-ha, roast lamb,  
 How summer's put to bed, no supper  
 After beast boys boasting pass the dipper.  
 No, I'll never say it. Never.  
 Kings could call me clever,  
 Show their wives wares favors

40 Toasty, pour the empty bottle  
 Over here please. I sing psalms just



To the thread that holds it all together,  
 Harp in hand, my knees and head  
 Elected by the dust to rule the doodle-do.

Lord, if I am crazy let me be so in name  
 Only. Haters, eaten from the inside out,  
 Ride slowly with their lawyers toward the exit  
 Door, and think it not there, but there is no out.



Lord, be my attorney      blow back my attackers  
 The winds make your argument      time is your courtroom  
 Defend me from pit men      their dank roadside ditches  
 Hide traps laid for passers-by      even the innocent  
 Grease their tracks, spin them      through slithery oil slicks  
 Into the sumps they've dug      hold their heads under  
 Then hear my bones shout      "Public Defender  
 No tongue for hire, he      parries the spoilers"  
 Bring on your witnesses      perjurers, peepers, claiming  
 They know me, those      strange to themselves

41



Though I feel sadly at others'      bad tidings, the owls  
 Hoot, jeer, mock when      told of my trouble  
 Enter my plea, now      my head's in a lion's mouth  
 Stripped, in a stadium      jurymen pointing, shout  
 "There he is, look at him"      God, stick their words  
 Down their throats      make them swallow hard  
 Wolves and accusers      convinced of my innocence  
 Then bring in the verdict      their shame and confusion  
 Sunlight on courthouse steps      your law book my love song  
 Of praiseworthy practice      that's worthy to try

*One**Will**Blossom*



Prophets whisper and a boom  
Rolls from the mountains,  
While the false can bellow  
Like a bronze bull offered  
Nothing by his worshippers  
And not be heard.

42

*Book**One*

Highness of the mountains  
(And the clouds above them,  
Moon and stars, and sun),  
Hide what gapes beyond  
From us; keep the climber  
Looking to the cliff, not down

At those who had no footing.



Fighting ignorance is pulling  
 Crabgrass from a lawn:  
     A waste.  
     Prune apple suckers,  
     Dig with earthworms.  
 Take the morning sun,  
     And shade at lunch.

The open hand gets filled,  
 A grasping one goes empty,  
 Angry, swearing to what can't  
     Be known. Look inside  
     Proud houses: no one home.  
 The meek inherit, and delight  
     While bad men grind their teeth  
     Is just a joke God laughs at.  
 Better honest poor than greedy  
 Rich, though poor is always harder.  
     Small need small want. The big,  
     The grabbers, will be eaten  
     As they eat, like burping  
 Mudbaths swallow up fat bathers.  
     Greed borrows and defaults.  
     The good give freely.

I was young before  
     And now am old:  
     Who does not know  
 The difference between men

43

*One**Will**Blossom*



And women, right and wrong  
Will never know.  
Although the bad seed towers  
Like a slippery elm,  
    Blight strips its leaves,  
    The tree's cut down  
And ground to mulch the base  
Of other ornamentals  
    Shading walks.

44



*Book*

*One*



Brought up short:  
 It hurts to think I am alive,  
     Bones stuck with arrows,  
     Understanding botched  
 With guilt. My bedsores weep, skin slick,  
 Sheets billow from gut-wrenching wind.  
 Friends carry flowers, keep a distance,  
     Napkins to their faces.  
 Those who hate me call my sickness  
     Judgment. Is it?  
     I heard nothing,  
 Would not see God spoke no longer.  
 I want to live, remembering my faults,  
     Am ready not to be.  
     If you are near, how  
 Many return good, or try to  
     Follow something other  
 Than self-measure? Do the hateful  
     Make their smiling matches  
     Over tables, split  
 Sides with laughter and the check?  
     Your joke. My body.  
     Now, or never.

45

∞

One

Will

Blossom



I said, I will watch my mouth  
And made no comment even  
On the good, and I was sad.  
My heart raced, something hot  
Inside me made me cry out loud:

46

*Book**One*

God, let me know when I've begun  
A thing, and when it will be done;  
Let me know how my days will run  
From hot and fat to dim, to fail  
And fall without a flutter by your hand.

What's there to wait for? Money? Power?  
What's there to hope for? Old age? Honor?  
The mock of dimwits? Spoiled children?  
Your finger pressed across my mouth.  
My lovely self was flannel, time a moth.

Hear me. Don't be put off by tears.  
I'm stranger and a nomad like my father.  
Give me strength enough to rise, to speak,  
To spill a glass of water on the tabletop before  
I thirst, and sip, and am no more.



For years I wanted more  
 Than sky to hear me mutter  
 More than meditations on the dark  
 Behind a wall. The cracks  
 On lake ice, wrinkled bells, had ways  
 To praise. Better stories  
 No one asks for, than to execute  
 Commissioned essays about oil  
 Paintings, strokes  
 Compelling taste adoring. Money  
 Offered is no different than blood  
 And mutton of burnt sacrifice,  
 Substantial but unmusical,  
 A seashell out of ocean.

47

*One**Will**Blossom*

Do cities, hungry for confusion,  
 Wait upon the violent moment  
 Written in a book?  
 They listen by the numbers, charts  
 And statues of the dire tales  
 Self-made giants call the real  
 World, a portrait of their nature  
 Worshipped. A volcano spews  
 Steam, ash, and coats its sides  
 With runny lava. Giants are not  
 Gods. Why crave approval?  
 Does a dogfish basking  
 In the shallows think, and wait  
 To hear from me?



It's hard to talk about the poor and not mean  
 "Poor me." Some think the cure is the disease.  
 Perhaps, if knowledge comforted, and fortune  
     Made no enemies.

Ninnies, calling sickness judgment,  
 Send for drugs to end my suffering,  
 And squabble over what I'll leave behind me.  
 Even friends I trusted eye their share of me

48

That is to come.



I am not dumb. God, pity dictates  
 That you set my foot down on top

*Book*

Of their heads, heavily, to stop

*One*

Their wagging tongues now, and indefinitely.



***Book Two* THE MOUNTAIN SOUND**

∞ Psalms 42–72







A panting hart run to the desert  
 Brays for water, no stream near,  
 And beagles, yipping, lap  
 His customary spring.  
 My soul licks salt tears as the pack  
 Gives tongue, baying,  
 "Where is God?"  
 This vacant lot in earshot  
 Of cartwheels, tumblers, loose change at their festival.

51



Why lose heart?  
 Hear bottom now?  
 I still can call out,  
 Still praise him.  
 Remember how dank rumbles  
 Guttered through the deep;  
 The mountain sound,  
 Combers broke over me?  
 Come daylight see the dark night of my soul:

*The  
 Mountain  
 Sound*

O my rock,  
 Can a rock be forgetting?  
 Is this night without starlight  
 Death in my bones?  
 "Where is God?"  
 O, my soul's heavy rock  
 In a free fall, the wind of its drop  
 Sounds like sighing.  
 Wait. Only wait. In the rush. God will come.



Between myself and the cheat what's to choose?

If I shrugged off strength and made gloom  
My whole practice, cursed weakness in anger,

Then I'd know no God but advantage.

O my soul, so unquiet. The wind drops. The hum.

52

*Book**Two*



We've heard the story many times  
Before, how our fathers  
Came to be who they are, started early,  
Made their money,  
Married, built the houses we grew up in:  
How they had to struggle  
Against bigots, brokers, bankers, greedy nations;  
They fought wars and won:  
Signs they were God's boast, the chosen.  
Our luck's turned bad.  
Those lions have raised sheep, with none  
To follow, shorn  
And slaughtered, beaten as a sport  
By clowns who spit  
Out Israel, a catcall, in our faces.

Yet we remember in our hearts  
And words, we walk  
The path you've plotted, through snakepits,  
Mobs and death camps,  
Past skyless streets, down alleyways,  
Brick air shafts. Here laws  
Serve things, give reasons why they kill us.  
God, you sleep?  
Are people cast-off clothes, a habit  
To be broken  
With effort underneath the wheels  
Of random trucks  
And left as treadmarks in the dust?  
Or help us, only  
For the sake of your own name.

53



*The  
Mountain  
Sound*



If the matter's good, then manner hardly matters.  
What's written in the heart a hand can copy quickly.  
I love to look at you because no word escapes your lips  
That was not written in your heart, and on your face.  
So float majestically through life where others crawl:  
Lies puff them up too large; truth keeps you small.  
Because you love to do what's right, you deserve  
The rare things: aloe soaps and lavender  
Perfume, cedar closets full of skirts and dresses,  
Silk shirts, buttons pearl and ivory, dainty  
Speeches such as birds made Solomon.

54

*Book**Two*

Listen, child, you will leave home  
Gladly, without tears, to walk with whom you please,  
And everyone will want to meet your happiness.  
Rich men's daughters and free spirits, true companions  
Fill your grown-up house, and children, many more  
Than met your father, who remembers that he loves  
You, always, to himself, out loud.



The earth is hollow, and has jaws.  
 Mountains topple whole into the ocean  
 Heart, which boils, bubbles.  
 Where I stand, a river turns  
 The heart into Jerusalem, a stream  
 Of thought into God's house.  
 Though day break, strange crowds enter roaring,  
 Batter at the doorposts,  
 The temple will not fall. Fear  
 Froze us in our tracks, but melted at a whisper:  
 God is with us.  
 Earth is full of life. Two broken  
 Armies in the field  
 Smoked destruction, engines dead,  
 Cars turtled, spinning wheels.  
 Silence comes before and after,  
 In the empty space around us,  
 And is with us.

55



*The  
 Mountain  
 Sound*



47 *Formula*

One hand clap  
Split the earth  
When Korah's  
Children jumped  
Back from the crack.

Two lips press on  
New Year's ram's horn.

56 Praise slips through clear air  
That closes.



*Book*

*Two*



The holy city's built on Zion mountain.  
Towers, walls encircle the high house.

There, God speaks to us  
So plainly armies filing through the waste can hear,  
So ships from Tarshish riding anchor shudder,  
Borne upon the rocks by an east gale.  
We watched them break up from our city windows.

Take a turn about the mountain,  
Its towers built upon our fathers' ruins.

Moses brought the law. His two hands  
Held out life and good, and death and evil:  
Then taught what follows.

57



*The  
Mountain  
Sound*



The plainest words, gotten by my understanding,  
Seem parables plucked on the muffled guitar string:

The ignorant don't follow why I'm not afraid  
Of the purse proud, who boasts he's made  
Billions but can't save himself or anyone  
From age, disease, and death. Though he see  
Jerks and movers, helpless knowers

58

Taken in mid-sentence, their heaps left to others,  
He thinks to himself that the ball cannot  
Level his house, strip the land he has named  
For himself: many acres, tall towers.

*Book**Two*

He will last

Like the dog lifts his leg on the cornerstone,  
Leaves his mark, then is gone with no trace.

But a man's not a dog.

Children read what the dead said.

The good are flowers, trees grown  
In rows over ranks of the dead,  
Fruit blossoms fed by the grave.  
A rich man's the bursting of seed pods,  
Ripened to scatter on the next puff of wind.  
Though, living, men praised him,  
They also admire the true understander,  
Who kept within sight of his meaning.

Without understanding,

The big man

Goes down into darkness, forgotten.

That man's dumb as a dog,

With nothing more said.



God, God of Gods  
 (No other here pink morning peaks  
 The violet quench of darkness falling  
 Hiss into the sea) divided  
 Portions at the family supper:

To some:

I God am God I  
 Need no roast lamb smoke  
 In nostrils shifting guilt  
 From sheep to goats,  
 Enforced confessions.  
 What I know you can't know,  
 Would not tell you, were I hungry.  
 I own all.  
 Does God chew steak, drink goat blood?  
 Praise, keep the law,  
 And know not need.

To others:

Lip service, fingers  
 Crossed behind your back,  
 Thieves, cheaters,  
 False oath swearing tale bearers:  
 Am I dumb?  
 Is this my image?  
 I will smash your faces in  
 The mirror you make up to, gazing  
 Into shallow pools,  
 And there you'll sink.

Think, in time all will  
 Take the cup, and drink.





Like a mother bear her shapeless newborn,  
Lick me into cub, O Lord — my proper shape:  
I'd rather turn out true than clever, steeped  
In arcane brews intent on power,  
Wanting wisdom. Make me water  
Melted from the summer glacier, run off  
Over crushed bone, gravel, spilled  
From the stone lip into singing pools.

60

*Book**Two*

The sound of water's better than the roar  
Of animals burnt on an altar: the broken  
Heartfelt not heart's blood makes sacrifice  
Acceptable to God, which freshens Zion.



Still boasting, mister taking care of number one?  
 (That sharp-tongued artist of the two-edged shaves  
 His mustache when he licks his upper lip.)

Kiss off what you've piled up by sacrificing  
 To your pot, what lies have gotten. Cracks  
 Will swallow down your house and children whole.

And me? I pluck ripe olives from the garden hedge,  
 Trusting the invisible supports  
 My next step, although the earth's crust's hollow.

61



*The  
 Mountain  
 Sound*



The fool says to himself, What God?  
 And takes, and breaks his word, and does  
 No good, no, none, not anyone. Such rot  
 In fruit would sicken flies.

God peered down through his window  
 In the sky, to see his children  
 At their lives, the men and women,  
 To find if even one still tried to know

62

*Book**Two*

Life and good from death and evil,  
 But they'd all gone back to witches'  
 Days, and gold greed blood haphazard couples  
 And no one knows, does, good, or teaches.

Don't they have an inkling of their doing,  
 Dying without shame and chewing  
 Up the people (who would, could they, love  
 The lore) like bakers' crusty loaves?

The bad have not called God by any name, not even  
 When the fear came on them, fear that floats  
 Like bone ash puffed by chimneys in the air, spouts  
 Of naked ignorance despised shamed by no God.

If only someone would save us from  
 The blind, our selves, the bloated, come  
 He from Jerusalem or nearer home

To sunder what has hindered us  
 From freedom and from happiness,  
 Then Israel, who wrestled, shall rejoice.



Hear, save me,  
In your name,  
By your strength,  
(My soul calls)  
From those who know  
Nothing, nor you.

It helps me,  
Supports me,  
Abashing the bad ones.  
Praise God  
For crushing them  
Now, in my lifetime.





God, bad enough to listen to the lies  
 Enemies bandy. My heart skips.

Fear of death impales me.  
 Given dove wings, I would fly  
 Into some empty place, and nest,  
 And rest, and there ride out the wind.

64

*Book**Two*

Scatter them, Lord, crack their lying  
 Beaks like bricks dropped from a city wall.

Mischief scrawled cold rumors on it,  
 Gave my name to what they did.

Worse, no enemy defamed me,  
 No flunkey from the other camp:  
 One of my own, familiar to my prayers,  
 My talk, my table. We would walk together.

I trust the words I say to God,  
 Not time, or size, or numbers.

Prayers will save me  
 From confusion and mutation.  
 But that friend who stretched  
 His hand against me, speaking  
 Butter, all the while bent  
 To shave me with his razor tongue:  
 Level him like Babel Tower.  
 I trust that clay man will die young.



They open up their mouths  
 To spit, to swallow me, to tear  
 Whatever words might dress  
 My actions in their sight to tatters.  
 I say "right," they hiss "left."  
 The adders hatch, and lurk, and cook.

The chapter in your book where gossip's measured  
 Against praise says none can harm me.  
 God is for me. What I know  
 Is written out, and pours like bottled water:  
 Spread a wing, Dove, let its shadow  
 Drive these basking lizards back  
 Into their holes. I want to cross the field  
 Lightly, want to give more than I take.





My mother told me:  
 When you come to the end  
     Of your rope,  
 Tie a knot, and hang on.  
     The knot's secure.  
 I swing on the bow  
     Arm of a cello,  
 Bridge with four strings,  
     Between steel  
 Towers outlined after sunrise  
     And their night lights  
     Blinking yellow,  
     Green.

66



*Book*

*Two*



They put snakes  
 Inside a woven basket,  
 Puff into the reed drone bladder, charm  
 Deaf adders with their spells  
 "That worked once, and will work again."  
 A mother  
 Lion licking afterbirth  
 Is likelier to purr for them, that pack  
 Of jackals giving tongue.  
 Extinct them,  
 Make them unborn, pull their teeth,  
 And I will count it as a victory  
 For those who go unwashed  
 In blood, for sense,  
 For feeling there's an order.


67



*The  
 Mountain  
 Sound*



Outside, dogs who worship  
Human masters howl against me,  
Want to taste my blood, to take  
My place. At night the starving pack  
Fights, lifts its leg upon my gate,  
Pants, drools, and snarls curses at me,  
Certain God won't hear, or care.

68      Some mockers make a butt of innocence,  
But cannot take a joke at their expense:  
 Having sucked their way into the seat,  
*Book*      They fear, perhaps, a loss of dignity  
*Two*      Should one pull back the chair. Take off  
The table, Lord, show their bare laps.

After dark the pack sniffs over trash heaps  
For scrap meat; dawn finds them restless,  
Snappish. Daylight, I am calm  
    Inside my fortress.



O God, the cup  
You pass to us  
Is crazed, is cracked.  
We drink it up.

God said, On earth  
I'll rest my sandal.  
Jordan is my  
Fingerbowl,  
Zion's sky  
An empty doorway  
To my city.

We said, But dip  
And we will sip, Lord.  
Always angry?  
Always praised.





61 *Unstrung*

Low tide, land's end, terns  
Pluck morsels from the seabed.  
Turn me out, God, let me be  
Ocean bottom, dune, a looming rock:  
Something larger, higher than  
That world contracted in my heart.  
I want to live a long time, singing  
Songs that mean and, saying, do.

70



*Book*

*Two*



I set my heart on finding  
     How the world worked,  
 Not the gossip business, old  
 Saws tried and true enough,  
     But mountain bolts  
     Of holy holy  
 Sacred flame low steady  
 Shimmers in the desert  
     Haze unspoken  
     Word a serpent  
 Biting tail in mouth  
     Unbroken circle  
 Keep the great beyond:

Little boys are vain.  
 They pick on one another,  
     Check the mirror.  
 The grown-up wise tell lies  
     About their powers.  
 Both are lighter than they seem.  
 Don't say, "I have done nothing."  
 God spoke twice:  
     "Strength comes from me,"  
 And,  
     "To each according  
     To his deeds."

71



*The  
 Mountain  
 Sound*



I wanted to see God more than I wanted  
Water in the desert, more than power  
Over others, so I watched the night sky  
Drinking deep cold milky spray.  
Next day I stretched out on the couch,  
Remembering the nightwatch:  
"Distances inside me go  
Deeper than a planet's shadow  
On the outer rings. Catch hold."  
But set my enemies beneath  
Your notice, feed them to the dogs  
That howl all night, hungry, outside  
City walls. Let me sing more.  
Stop the liars' mouths with dirt.

72

*Book**Two*



Plots afoot.  
They press a button.  
Barbs fly from nowhere.  
Tracks well covered. No ends dangle  
Loose, for clues. Perfection.

Great Detective!  
Who escapes deduction?  
Not the mouthpiece chopping  
Logic, who'll have to hear his heart  
Attacked. That cheers me up.

73



*The  
Mountain  
Sound*



We wait for you, Lord,  
Even here.  
Choose someone of us,  
Let him near  
You, brave enough to hear  
Your answer.  
Winter gales spew oceans  
Of salt rain.

74

Mountain faces crumble, scree  
Banks streams.



Rivers muddied glide into the sea,

*Book*

Mouths open.

*Two*

We hear the oceans inside

Seashells, see

Whole cities in a puddle,

Taste the air.

Your far stars blink in colors,

Freak the jet.

A year breathes out and in.

When rocks

Seem soft, the air has edges:

All living

Shout your praises, or doubting

Softly sing.



What made all the earth has been  
 Forgotten even by the ones disposed to know.  
 Perhaps a list of what was done for Jacob's children helps:  
 The Red Sea parted, they crossed dry shod,  
 Following the smoke and fire pillar placed before them.  
 Stranger prophets could not curse them.  
 Basic appetites would test them, thirst and hunger  
 Make them falter, long for Egypt's slave abundance.  
 Forty years a generation wandered looking backward,  
                                  disappeared.

75



I appear before the book God gave to Moses  
 With full hands, with promises made when  
 I could not know I would be able, kept:  
 The ox, the goat, the lamb, the song of praise.  
 God heard the music of my heart. I leapt.

*The*  
*Mountain*  
*Sound*



If dust stays dry, and clouds bring only wind,  
Then people dread the sunrise. Morning hymns  
Sound hollow. Not for us. We follow seed  
With hope and harvest grain with thanks. God  
Made fields to produce. God led us, when  
We could not remember what believing was,  
With promised land, and fed us in the waste.

76

*Book**Two*



Sunrise, the fog fibers trail on breezes  
 With woodsmoke, cold wax melts, mute fear visions vanish.  
 But we will get up, will recite a long song:

Tall clouds bank the highway, the blue one God travels,  
 Over the lonely hearts' home, where we willing dance  
 Madly to old tunes piped in from the wasteland.

Once children went walking on thorns in the desert  
 Through earthquake and droughtland. They carried no bottle.  
 Dew fed their hunger, and washed them, refreshed them

77



*The  
 Mountain  
 Sound*

As now we hope rain falls to water the grainfields,  
 To green up our grazing lands, pastures, the orchards  
 Of fruit hanging ripe, falling, peels on fire.

Doves wheel, gulls mew, feathers turned yellow  
 In sunlight so deep that its shadows are snowcaps  
 On white mountain peaks where the wind wails baldly,  
 Down pine forest foothills of moss and soft boulders.

A blessing, the day we were led out of Egypt.  
 Hot snakes gasped, the sea, silenced, bowed back before us:  
 Egyptians and Canaanites, dog food and fish bait.

Our small children danced to the names of their enemies:  
 First came the singers, then instruments, drummer girls  
 Marked time for merchants, slaves, priests, scholars, princes:



Our youngest will lead us, will rebuild Jerusalem,  
Level the bramble bush, free us, retrieve us  
However we're scattered.

Look at the sky. It speaks if you have an ear.  
What could contain the blue? Eyes cannot find its end.  
Praise as we're able to, maker of atoms, the actor upon us  
Whose presence we walk through.

78



*Book*

*Two*



Sucked down slowly, so I know  
My feet will not touch bottom.  
Soupy sand creeps past my neck,  
My chin. Help. God,  
If I open my dry mouth,  
Muck will ooze in.  
I slipped among the ones  
Who love not, liars, fakers,  
Thieves, who feed on others'  
Misery, who smile and shake  
Hands underneath the table.  
You do not deal with them  
As you have dealt with me,  
Though I wore hopsack  
To their satin, though  
I fasted at their feast,  
The butt of drunken  
Songs they tooted.  
I composed you psalms.

So save me now, show  
Mercy without pity.  
Answer, blush  
From my disgrace,  
As though you did not know it.  
Turn the mockers' tables  
Into settings they can't rise from,  
No relief despite the pressure  
Built between their jellied thighs

79



*The  
Mountain  
Sound*



And buttocks, blind them, blister  
Ulcers, gut too weak to stand,  
Then make them listen to repeated  
Stories of the good  
Grown rich again.

                                  Though incense  
Raise a scented column in the sky,  
Though long-horned bulls die  
On the altar, the knife's work  
Is not so pleasant as a song,  
The work of life. God hears them  
With the sun, moon, stars, earth, sea, and air:  
What stirs inside them stirs us.  
God save us then, make good  
Our losses which shook everything  
But what we knew, our memories  
Of Zion, when we will return.

80



*Book*

*Two*



Hurry, carry me away  
From those who wish me ill and hurt.  
Give them confusion for dessert.  
Stump them with flusters as they go  
    “Tsk, tsk.”  
Let all who look outside themselves  
Make happy choices, bless their chances:  
But I have nothing, now, so help me  
    God, do not delay.





Closer to the end, I always trusted  
 Life continues, though at times  
 The outlaw bands surrounded me  
 On horseback in the open plains,  
 Fired repeated shots  
 And no rock, no cave, no cliff nor cover near.  
 Since childhood, I have survived  
 Their godforsaken consultations,  
 A young man born to rule  
 Himself, and others. Now white hair  
 Wisps, my grip slack on the walking stick,  
 And people when they look at all  
 See baggy suit, large knuckles folded  
 One upon the other, don't quite catch  
 The name, the choice that made me  
 What I am.

82

*Book**Two*

I lift my head up  
 From the table doze. Late afternoon  
 In winter sunlight floods our benches  
 Anchored to the traffic islands.  
 My companions ply their canes,  
 Beat time while sitting, but I sing  
 Because I'm able: God  
 Of Israel, still twang  
 The evening string, my soul  
 Caught sweetly in the longer shadows:  
 Darkness swallows up confusion  
 Raking gravel smooth around the ruin.



Give this child judgment, and more children  
So that he, and they, can govern  
One another, face-to-face, like Moses talking  
To the well-spring wished  
That all the offspring might be prophets.  
That mountain shadow  
Lengthened in the wilderness. It touched  
Our cities, made the far  
Ends of the earth, lands beyond the sea  
Remember what life might be  
Like, if wanting didn't make us bow to idols,  
Power, money, safety, famous  
For a time, then ground and scattered by a wind.  
If not this one, let someone  
Come and lead us to ourselves. We lift our hand  
To fend the needless blow,  
Will feed the needy then. We show the blossom,  
Trunk, limb, fruit, sow  
Grain, and knead the bread. We think the sunlight  
Gold on the west wall  
Is afternoon. Let us know more than can be said.









*Book Three* NOT YOU AND  
NOT THOSE THINGS

❧ Psalms 73–89







Here's a picture of the bad ones I once envied:

Everything came easily: they did not need  
 To work to make their living, want  
 A catchy line, an angle to find lovers or companions  
 At the dining table: tan and fit from laps and basking  
 Poolside, they order drinks and gaze at the deep sky,  
 Chuckle at the devil, protest unjust god:  
 Superstitions meant for dimlit losers.  
 They eat the land bare, suck the ocean  
 Dry as though they had it in their goblet, tall  
 And frosted, with their tongues' tips swish  
 Strong currents of the deep.

If I painted

Such a picture for you once, just feeling  
 Without understanding that I envied  
 Not another person but a creature of my dreams,  
 Then my mind would curdle, heart dry up,  
 And I'd have been the dream beast I invented.  
 But the real touched me, cool and smooth,  
 Taught me to be able to have everything,  
 Need nothing, like the names of things  
 That are not you and are not those things  
 Either, in a picture story song.

87



*Not You  
 and Not  
 Those  
 Things*



Why always angry, God? Why smoke against us and inhale  
Sacrifices? Zion's rubble. Temple hacked  
To splinters, they burn children with their teachers.  
No sign, no prophet here to read  
A dream or point to ashes' traces of some promised justice.  
They mock the name that I can't  
Speak, and gingerly pluck baubles from the coals.  
Destroy them, Lord.

88

Return us. You once crushed  
The seven-headed ocean-haunting twisted beast Leviathan  
And fed his brains as manna cake  
To children in the desert. You opened springs from rocks,  
You raised silt islands from deep  
River beds, and dried them. You set sun and moon, the different  
Bodies of the day and night, you  
Flickered lightning bugs in summer garden spaces between trees.  
Made standing puddles glinting ice.  
You taught us, now deliver us  
From those who worship templed darkness. Look,  
We blush for you, your name,  
Though we are poor, and weak, and strangers roar.

*Book**Three*



I lift up my arms, and watch the earth rise  
 Above its base self, upon pillars, on praise.  
 While fools cut sharp deals in the dog teeth of death,  
 They blow their own horns. Their necks stiffen.

What lifts us up comes from within, without  
 One false note, or false steps, or deception.  
 Pour off the good wine; let the bad  
 Swill the bowl's dregs, get plastered and flushed.

89



More than sing songs of praise, God,  
 I'll cut off the horns of their boast in mid toot;  
 Raise your own horn heads, brass with silvery valves,  
 Lift the bell full of blue sky and blow.

*Not You  
 and Not  
 Those  
 Things*



Israel once saw the law made visible,  
Took heart,  
Built God's house in Jerusalem.

Armies rained night fire on Zion's mountain.  
Terror took them in their sleep.  
Sometimes love in sight of danger  
Makes an old man angry

90

Wishing for the end of time,  
A dry well deeper than the hate of strangers.



*Book*

*Three*



Hear me, first of all, when night sweats attack  
 My sleep with sores, with jitters, pacing. Faces  
 Haunt me. I play music, hope the fright will pass.

What happened? Am I no more fortune's  
 Favored singer, dreamer, seer, drenched  
 In oils, visions, dances? Can the bottomless run dry?

You once stood by Joseph and for Jacob's children held  
 Pharaoh at arm's length, made water part. Clouds  
 Streaked day's streaming face. Light nocked its arrow.

When God's foot skips a beat upon the ocean floor  
 (The ocean that's above us), no one knows or sees  
 The measure. Time remains to lead us by the hand  
 Of a Moses, of an Aaron.

91



*Not You  
 and Not  
 Those  
 Things*



The past is riddled with old stories  
 Told by grandparents to children:  
 Remember how the people came  
 To be called chosen, and no sooner  
 Hoped than were forgotten?

God

Reminded Jacob's children's children  
 Of their nomad fathers' deep confusion:  
 Who were they? Where did they come from?  
 How sea water stood like dikes  
 Against the flood of Pharaoh's army,  
 How day cloud and night fire made a pillar  
 Signpost where there was no road,  
 How bare rock spouted rivers through  
 The wasteland, and how people spoke  
 Against what saved them, asked for meat  
 To go with water, asked for bread,  
 For table service where there was no table.

God heard them, rumbled heaven open,  
 Tumbled manna from the sky, threw wheat  
 For angel cake, sent dust storms stocked  
 With quail dropped around their tents.  
 They ate what cravings made them. Full,  
 They pushed back from the table  
 And complained. God cut them down.

For all this they believed no more  
 In providence than in their own days:

92



*Book*

*Three*



Water poured on rock at noon.  
Seeing shadows overtake them  
They remembered what made mountains  
Mumble, staggered by the burden  
Of just being's vacant lot.  
God remembered flesh was made  
Of knowing, life a ripple shortly  
Smoothed on doldrum waters. If not  
Miracles, why not believe  
In plagues? Blood clotted Nile  
Swarming flies, frogs, fields rattling  
Clouds of grasshoppers and locusts,  
Hail-beaten grapevines, frost  
Nipped sycamores, sheep and cattle  
Lightning spitted, epidemic, last  
The first-born of all Egypt  
Taken on the dark wing as they slept.

93



*Not You  
and Not  
Those  
Things*

God led his children out of bondage,  
Through the sea and into emptiness,  
Sat them around the holy mountain,  
Read them stony laws, shook out  
Nations from the skirting lands  
Time promised them, and pitched their tents.

Children, grown to be their fathers,  
Praised statues, groves in hillside shrines.  
A fair breeze folded Jacob's tents  
Among their enemies: no ark,  
No promise left, the young men burned  
Or butchered, virgins taken without



Ceremony, priests erased,  
And widows did not mourn at all.

That silence shook the rock awake, and  
David, chosen from his pastures, toppled  
Giant idols with a sling. He built  
A court in Zion. People followed him.  
He shepherded the children skillfully.





Foreigners have broken down the old walls  
 Of Jerusalem. God's chosen rot  
 In open places, food for vultures, ravens, jackals.  
 Their blood became a river through Jerusalem,  
 Our name a joke, a byword, and a taunt.

How long before you pour down  
 Wrath upon those who will not hear  
 You have a name, who ignorant  
 Burn books and torture learning, forge  
 Us iron chains and say, "Where is their God?"

A prisoner cannot cry loud or long.  
 Cramp their mocking hearts, God, seven  
 Spasms for each curse; for every day, a week.

95



*Not You  
 and Not  
 Those  
 Things*



Listen, reader of the dreams  
 Interpreted by Joseph, who led  
 Israel into Egypt, brought them  
 Up again: return us to ourselves.

However long it takes to mill,  
 To knead the sorry flour, our bread  
 Crumbles and the neighbors jeer.

96

*Book**Three*

Return us to ourselves. Why plant  
 These terraced hills with vineyards,  
 Cork trees, almonds, olives, cedars,  
 Willows trailing in the river?

Passing strangers trample down  
 Thorn hedges, pluck the orchards  
 Bare. Deer and boar root out

The broken fruit. Can you look down  
 And not return us to ourselves,  
 The chosen cutting scorched, uprooted?  
 O unpronounceable that made us,

Make us strong again. We know  
 There is no going back.  
 Return us to ourselves.



What the God of Jacob said through Joseph, we sing  
 In a psalm, accompanied by tambourine and shepherd's harp.

New moon, full moon, blow the horn of Israel

Again. About the law:

When I sent Joseph down to Egypt

(Strange tongues spoken there)

I took his brothers off his shoulders,

Saved him from the chore pots.

He called, I answered him

With dreams. I answer you with thunder:

Split rocks gush bitter water.

Do not worship strangeness

In yourself or others' glamour:

I led you out of Egypt, and will

Fill your mouth. Just open

When I speak: but no one listens.

Had they not loved the sound of their own voices,

Chosen lust, and meat, and hate,

I would have made them masters over all they met,

Would have fed them white bread milled from finest wheat,

Spread with honey from the rock.

97



*Not You*

*and Not*

*Those*

*Things*



Those with heaps of money, made  
Or born to it, though they play  
With bankers, senators, with generals,  
Like gods to mortals, while they  
Stroll in knots through crowded halls  
Where others bustle, they are judged,  
Rejected by what they don't know,  
And think because they can command

98

They are beloved. Not for long.  
Time to stand up for the put-upon,

*Book**Three*

Who must believe the bad do well  
Because they would be gods, as I am  
Certain all of us are children  
Of the Lord, but also humans  
Who will die, will fall like rulers  
From the high seat to a black hole:  
Wake up, judge, the gods decay  
And leave the earth for you.



Speak now against the nations  
Leagued against us, God,  
That would erase all trace of Israel:  
Edom, Ishmael, Moab and the sons of Hagar;  
Byblos, the Amalekites, the Philistines,  
Phoenicians and Assyrians, Lot's children:  
Crush them like Midian, drive nails  
Through their temples like Jael luring Sisera;  
Grind their bones for fertilizer, make them —  
Kings who thought to seize our grazing lands —  
Soft prey for Gideon, who tossed  
Their dry husks to the tumble wind:  
Be fire to their timber, blow hot  
Hurricanes into their eyes until they fall  
Flat on their faces when the least of Jacob's  
Whispers, once we read your name.

99



*Not You  
and Not  
Those  
Things*



Sparrows rant in the ivy walls of a brick courtyard.  
Broad eaves shelter swallows. Rain streaks dust  
Tracks down windows, overflowing the stone birdbath.  
Some puddles are deeper than the towers they reflect.  
A crowd of finches stretch their wings, splash,  
Chatter. The doorman takes more cheer  
From them than from the tenor oboing his scales  
Behind a velvet curtain. He also feels the sun  
Beam through the damp lens more directly,  
And his head is covered.

100

*Book**Three*



God once smiled on Israel,  
 Returned them from captivity,  
     Forgotten and forgiven.  
 Now think of us, let us remember  
 More than anger, more than children  
     Heaped before their fathers.  
 Speak us peace, and all who are not  
 Fools must listen. Blow one kiss  
     And dandelions, truth  
 Will sprout through cracking sidewalks, wild  
 Puffballs, fierce and multiplying.  
     The second kiss brings rain.

101



*Not You  
 and Not  
 Those  
 Things*



Listen, God, I need  
You, hear me.

Cheer me  
In this darkness.  
Give me back  
(My soul is ready  
Now to leave me)  
Any answer.

102    I don't question  
You believe me.



Teach me trust  
*Book*    In the returning  
*Three*    Promise, shame  
My enemies  
In public, enter  
My heart in your  
Book of splendors.



The sky rests on the mountains  
Like a house on its foundation;  
God has blessed the doors of our houses  
More than any place in any other city:  
A gorgeous name and musical, Jerusalem.

You know me as a man from maybe Rahab, Babylon;  
Another harks from Tyre, Ethiopia, or calls  
Philistia his birthplace; but to be born in Zion  
Is a blessing, is to be born inside the holy city.  
It counts, by all accounts, to pray, Jerusalem.

My mother, home of singers  
And strummers on the living strings:  
All there, and there my being springs.

103



*Not You  
and Not  
Those  
Things*



I cry and cry, so down I can't get out of bed.  
 My bedroom floor yawns like a grave  
 Where, free, the dead stack, sunk below.  
 The family waves good-bye, remembering.  
 Friends turn aside, look past my shoulder.  
 I no longer leave the house,  
 I have no face to show the world,  
 And I still call to you, and wonder  
 Can the dead stop in their tracks, amazed,  
 And stand up cheering what you do?  
 What good is kindness to the pit,  
 Or accuracy in oblivion?  
                     And yet I cry: I clutch  
 The hem of morning. You ignore me.  
 Young and ignorant, I suffered  
 Fears flocked in my face like crows  
 At carrion, and I am not alone:  
 All I have known have done  
 The quick dissolve, and enter darkness.

104

*Book**Three*



I made love to the sky,  
 To steady stars, its milky blurs:  
 Day's the night's mask worn for us.  
 We don't live by starlight's frozen  
 Sequined curtain never opened.

Some have chosen to believe  
 What can't be certain: others made  
 God vanish in a flood of wordy bargains,  
 Filled with reasons there's no justice.  
 Comparisons can't break the sea surge.

What newborn's larger than its mother?  
 Planets cooled from eddied gases,  
 Thought's a bubble. Home, our habit  
 Was to listen for some inkling  
 What the sky meant. And it spoke once:

"I poured oil on the child's head  
 Who sang to me, not out of need,  
 Of generations grown from seed,  
 Tall cedars axes will not cut down,  
 Shelter from the moth, the flame:

"The sea in one hand, Jordan  
 In the other, he will be both sweet  
 And salty to the taste, to those  
 Who love, or hate, and he shall call me  
 Father, maker of the mountains,

105



*Not You  
 and Not  
 Those  
 Things*



“Shaker of the world to come,  
And I will place him first  
Among the living always. He will  
Live fulfilled, when his cold bones  
Know he’s dying, that his son’s sons’

Sons will sit in splendor for an hour  
Of their day in heaven. Broken laws  
I punish, but not broken hearts.  
This child’s name will last as long,  
No, longer than the sun and moon.”

106



Children never listen.

*Book*

Singsong taunts

*Three*

And pointed fingers.

What God greater?

Who’s your father?

How much longer must we take it?  
Is life really hollow nothing?  
We are born, we live, we die,  
But to live out death in life?  
Not to love even myself?

Promise me like yesterday  
You told the child  
You would love him always.  
Tell me now they pour down  
Insults, oil on my head.



*Book Four* WHERE WE HAVE  
ALWAYS LIVED

∞ Psalms 90–106







Lord, where we have always lived  
Before the earth and sun were born,  
You made us children of destruction  
And ask us to return again, return  
Although an eye blinks and a thousand  
Years pass, though the night watch hours  
Creep crawl to eternity. Days crest  
Past on the sweeping flood, sleep  
To the sleepless, no sooner grown then mown  
Grass, clippings blown across the walk.  
Your anger wind time swallows up  
Our secrets, whistles through our faults,  
Our faces masks worn in a tale  
Seventy or eighty years (that's  
For the lucky) told in work and tears.  
How strong's the wind? More than we fear.  
So teach us how to weigh a day,  
To wear the burden of a heart.  
Because we do not know how long  
Before we must return, Lord,  
Damp the dust with small rain, shade  
The strong sun behind towered clouds  
Sometimes, so that our children know  
A dappled place much like our fathers had,  
But happy, not the evil we have learned  
To handle, greedy factories of hate,  
And let some part of what we've made last  
Touch upon you, that part  
A heart or hand has made.

109



*Where*  
*We Have*  
*Always*  
*Lived*



Live sheltered by the shadow of the highest  
Mountain and remember  
When you walked through quicksand,  
Plagues passed over other doorsills in the dark,  
Days when arrow swarms pursued and thousands fell  
Around you, and you stood, unmarked.  
As you saw the latter parts of splendor pass before you,  
Watch the bad ones' lives become their punishment.  
Angels guard you, guide your steps  
Down curbs through heavy traffic.

110

*Book*

Because one called out the unspoken name

*Four*

I answer cries with laughter,  
Turn labor into honors,  
Teach the flavor of cold water.  
He will live a long time  
And be thought of later.



Thank you. I love  
To sing at first light,  
Pluck a gut string  
In the watches of the night:  
A little song, with rocks  
And sea, and sky, without  
Confusion of the parts.

Rocks sink. The sea is deep.  
It holds the sky's dear  
Face, the sun and moon  
Also. Life started here.  
Fools don't believe  
This, think the waters  
Tame and sounded,  
Something with a name.

I heard music, foghorns  
Over jetties, smelled  
Sap from fresh-cut cedar  
Trees that grew straight  
Up the mountain slopes  
Of Lebanon. Let me grow  
Old, let my sap run.

111



*Where  
We Have  
Always  
Lived*



The ruler wrapped on earth and sky  
Measures the world, that fixed  
Place where people live and hear  
The heartbeat ocean break  
Waves up limestone cliffs, blue air,  
And know God dwarfs the sound  
Of tidal bores. Hard to unravel  
Knots in a high gale, or silent  
Calm when sun bears down, so we live  
Here content to think we know yet may  
Not say your real name forever.

112

*Book**Four*



Up, up, and show yourself  
 The judge of people doing what they want,  
 Saying what they will and damn  
 The consequences. "Nothing follows, meaning's  
     Deader than the children  
 Crushed beneath our jackboot heel.  
     Let them whimper. God  
 Is not, is far away, and does not care."

Some never learn. Can one who planted  
 Ears of corn not hear the zephyr rustle  
     In the stalks, who made the sun's eye  
 Flare not see the shadow you cast here?  
 The scatterer of nations not disperse  
 Your atoms? Is the teacher unprepared?  
     God knows how thought gets mangled.  
 So law was given Moses to untangle  
 Ignorance and impulse, love and fear  
     Of what comes after, for a snare.

Had I not heard from life beyond my silence,  
 I'd have slipped into the crowd unseen  
 And died without desire comforted.

Too neat, my Lord? You taught me  
 Safety in disorder, and the pleasure  
     Of imagining that justice  
 Crushes glinting evil to gray powder.

113



*Where  
 We Have  
 Always  
 Lived*



The rock we stand on is the rock  
We sing to: deep as wellshafts  
High as glacier tops: the land  
We live on and the ocean smaller  
Only than the sky that rests inside  
Its cup:

A heart is harder

Than the wilderness our fathers  
Wandered, proof that they were  
Human, bitter like the aftertaste  
Of water in a mouth turned forty  
That has never kissed except  
In lust, or rage, or envy, after  
Wanting, wanting, and no rest.

114

*Book**Four*



New moon, new song:  
 Day short, night long.  
 Break sea, roar winds:  
 One God, more minds.  
 Stars blink. Suns cool.  
 Tongues twist. Souls rule.  
 Smoke's sweet. Song doubts.  
 Times dance. Rain spouts.

Lose hope. Sow seed.  
 Cast bells. Ring true.  
 Not want, just need.  
 First frost. Late dew.

115



*Where*  
*We Have*  
*Always*  
*Lived*



I saw a picture of the earth afloat  
In space: a solar marble, cloud  
Veins in blue ore, oceans studded  
With green islands, continental  
Rust, capped, footed by iced poles:  
Water-swollen mountain glaciers  
Melted in the sun's wax candle.  
What chains this jewel hung  
On vacuum's throat? Who knows  
The name, could show a sliver  
Of that shattered beaker (left  
Behind when all the other shards  
Swept back to nothingness) was  
Creation's germ, and not be pierced  
So deeply no blood flowed? Be glad  
We're small, be glad no one can tell  
What happens next and no returning.  
Only one returns those promises  
Substantial as the sands our fathers  
Sifted through their fingers  
For us, moments when their hearts  
Felt easy, and they did not boast.

116

*Book**Four*



Sing a new song at the new moon,  
The old sky, a sickle for harvesting  
All we remember. Our versions

Might last long as drumbeats  
And footfalls. The left hand stops  
Frets and the right strums in tempo.

Clouds dance with conductors.  
And thunder claps. Mountains peak.  
Waving, the wind clears its throat.

117




*Where  
We Have  
Always  
Lived*



An avalanche shakes clots  
Of peak into the passes,  
Thunder under cloud.

A cloudy pillar talked to Moses.  
Moses spoke to Aaron. Samuel  
Heard his name called after bedtime,

118        Learned to call upon the Lord.  
             They worshipped what almost  
        Forgave them, then did, finally.

*Book*

*Four*



It helps to make a lot of noise  
When on the earth. We did not,  
Were modest, too, until God made us  
Enter squally bawling thank-yous  
In our lifetime, children's children.



*Where  
We Have  
Always  
Lived*



Lord, I can only sing  
 What my senses show,  
 Unless it come to me  
 From you. So when?

I never worshipped pictures,  
 Cultivated adders by detracting others,  
 Said what one could never know.

120 I cut their puffs off in mid-sentence.



*Book*

*Four*



The sky is blue but blank.  
 Fire crackles in the leaves.  
 Wood smoke curls to heaven.  
 I do not hanker for dry reeds,  
 No pelican with empty bill blown inland,  
 An owl in daylight far from rafters:  
 One sparrow perched on the roof ridge,  
 Crow flocks circle me with caws.  
 They snatch my crumbs, and no one  
 Drives them off. My days have gone  
 To creeping shadows, brown  
 Grass waiting for the sickle.  
 But you, you last, you live  
 For children of the since departed.  
 You will help them later,  
 Because the stones and dust  
 Of foreign places became their pleasure,  
 Because they have remembered how  
 To pray, to say what's in their hearts,  
 Your name. This will be written  
 To their children, and the lined-up  
 To be born will sing your praise:  
 Who can see from a great height  
 Into the earth and hear the groans:  
 Release time's hostage passion poisoned:  
 Crowds dying whispering "Jerusalem."

I walked, I weakened, breath got short:  
 I said, Not now, Lord, in the middle

121



*Where*  
*We Have*  
*Always*  
*Lived*



Of these days born and done  
Beyond the rim of time where earth  
First met the sun and moonlight sky:  
Stars also fall out of their frame,  
A canvas hung in weather tatters,  
Then's exchanged for new. But you  
Don't change, don't track the way  
The spokeless years do. You protect  
Your children, and their children  
Do go on.

122



*Book*

*Four*



My soul remembers but does not  
 Know how to say the name:  
 That one forgives without forgetting,  
 Draws me living from the pit again,  
 Rings changes, stays the same.

A burning bush made Moses know  
 Himself, while Israel discovered  
 Anger does not last forever,  
 Nor do crimes against each other.  
 We are small, have need to measure.

The distance from the top of living  
 Heaven to the bone cold deep of time  
 Beggars numbers, but allows no space  
 For what we call our God inside  
 There, even by comparison.

That made us clay from dust,  
 Our days like grass, our pleasures wild  
 Flowers blown by passing breezes:  
 Come and gone, we know ourselves  
 No longer, and are known no more.

The children's children heard of days  
 Always returning, so they hope to learn  
 From life, and good, and death and evil.  
 They set a ruler in the sky, to measure  
 Water leaked between their fingers.

Tonight the sky's a slate cleared for some word:  
 Meteors, star spray, and falling messengers.

123



*Where  
 We Have  
 Always  
 Lived*



Bless the pitcher of the sky's light tent  
    (Winds are tentpoles, clouds stays),  
Who draws the curtains, sends out messengers:  
    Old stars chilling distances;  
The rising sun burns puddles hung with rope  
    Mists on the changing earth.  
Bless the layer of the rock foundation,  
    Raiser of the great divides,

124

*Book**Four*

Where rivers fork to east or west, in beds,  
    And find sea level in the end,  
And rise again. Fresh springs, rock wells quench  
    All thirsts that walk, or fly, or set  
Seed, bud, green up and flower fruit: wine  
    Grapes to ease the heart; fat olives,  
Herbs and cereal grasses to make bread.  
    Sap rises in the junipers  
Of Lebanon: storks nest there. In cliff clefts  
    Mountain goats hopscotch and butt.  
The moon marks fallow plowing sowing harvest  
    Seasons, and the sun sets. Nights,  
Horned owls hunt for mice, and lions roar  
    At starlight for large prey. Dawn,  
Raptors flap or slip back to the den,  
    Leaving day work to the human  
Makers of their own invented prizes.  
    Ocean — broad and sometimes taller  
Than the headland, silver shadow creatures  
    Glide through transparent density,  
Slip underneath the keel like lives of people



Only known as chthonic rumor —  
Floats Leviathan, fed on krill and plankton,  
The largest on the smallest, full.  
Creation grazes from your open hand:  
God, never turn away.  
Without the breath, all's clay, and dead.  
Love answers fear. Earth's  
Greater than what's known. What's known  
Exceeds what's said.  
So touch the mountains with your smoking finger.  
I'll chant praises of my being  
Here long as I can. The ignorant,  
Their darkness, disappear.

125



*Where  
We Have  
Always  
Lived*



A cold wind in the treetops:

Remembering put words to it:

How Abraham and Jacob chose  
To listen, wrestled with the first  
Belief: that earth was given to us  
When there were a few of us  
So we might know where  
We came from, and could sing again  
The promise made to Abraham,  
Sworn over prostrate Isaac, pledged  
To Jacob at the draw: All yours.

126

*Book**Four*

For that small tribe, strange kings  
Turned impotent, for them the dreamer  
Sold ahead to slavery, for them  
The harvests failed. Joseph, shackled,  
From his prison read the glyphic  
Pharaoh's dreams as living speech;  
Named steward to the land, he  
Brought Israel to Egypt. There  
They fed. The children multiplied.  
Egyptians played them false.

For them, the one thread that connects  
Beginning to the end yet has none, sent  
Moses and Aaron, serpents, blood  
For Nile water, frogs on bedsheets, swarming



Flies, mosquitoes, hail, lightning flattened  
Fields blighted orchards vineyards: locusts  
Blanketed the gardens, God  
Struck down all Egypt's firstborn  
For them, leaving Egypt weeping  
At their backs, and spread a cloud above them  
To keep off the sun. A pillared fire  
Burned at night. For them, live quails,  
Bread from stone-ground wheat,  
For them sweet water gushed between the rocks.

127

So God remembered all his promises  
To Abraham, and led his chosen  
People singing Hebrew out of exile  
Freely as wind passes through tall trees:  
The land was theirs as long as they remembered  
How the story goes, and kept the law.



*Where  
We Have  
Always  
Lived*



Praise returns  
This people to the home they left  
For foreign places, flavors rolled  
Upon the tongue, flat bread  
Broken at a stranger's table.

128

*Book**Four*

We are children of the fathers  
Who forgot what led them up  
From Egypt, made the reed sea  
Part for them, a sandy causeway  
Through the gulf. When water  
Buried Pharaoh's army  
They believed, but only  
For a little while: hunger  
Made them whine, made quail  
Drop from clouds and water  
Split bare rock. God fed them,  
Yet their souls were thin,  
Transparent: envy bucked  
At Moses, Aaron: the earth  
Cracked and swallowed Dathan.  
They cast a bull of molten gold  
At Horeb, as a thing to hang  
Religion on. They could not bear  
The inexplicable performed  
By namelessness. Though Moses  
Stood between them and the blast  
Of wonder, they would live  
Their days out seeing waste,



No land of promises fulfilled.  
They grumbled in their tents.  
On their account their children's  
Children's children would be  
Captives forced to eat the leavings  
Of the dead. Plague ate them hungry,  
Turned on Phinehas' spit. Moses,  
Stung beside the well of bitter  
Waters, let his anger slip.  
These fathers lived with strangers,  
Married idol lovers, sacrificed  
Their babies to the beaks of Canaan,  
Coupled every way they could  
Imagine. Fortune left them  
To be ruled by hatred.  
At times some rose to show them  
Back to their own selves  
And laws, and did, until  
Forgetting overtook them.  
Yet when a heart, a child cries  
Out to the dark, the cry is heard,  
And people think about returning.

Gather us together, Lord,  
Captives scattered among strangers,  
Lead us back, for we remember  
Promises and praise.

129



*Where  
We Have  
Always  
Lived*







***Book Five* RETURN. PROMISE.**

∞ Psalms 107–150







Always returning to the promise, I remember  
Some few kept in mind what they had seen  
Of parted sea, of wasteland nurture, law.  
Wandering the wilderness, they cried out  
To God, to their confusion, and were heard.  
Their children founded places, and were fed.

So later generations fill their mouths with praises:  
Proud minds humbled clang on dentless shells  
Of greed, of grief, of gorgeous meditations  
In the captive darkness, until, light gone,  
They thought that death was freedom.

133

*Return.**Promise.*

So later generations fill their mouths with praises:  
Prisoners of self, good taste, they found no food  
To like, and did not eat, and would have died  
Had they not eased the grip on their own throats  
And let slip bread and water past their lips.

So later generations fill their mouths with praises:  
A sailor's business is the ocean. On his watch  
He peered into the abyss: wind twisted masts  
Like paper, breakers boiled yellow, rigging  
Crackled with drowned souls. The compass spun.

So later generations fill their mouths with praises:  
It's possible to die from too much skill,  
And possible to live not knowing how  
The storm blew, how merchant port was found.  
It's possible to live and never once be calm.



So later generations fill their mouths with praises:  
How people settled cities, planted vineyards,  
Sowed grain in fields, covered grazing lands.

So the story keeps returning, of great armies  
Lost in deserts, of the small made splendid,  
Blessed with family and flocks, of the wicked  
Choking on their empty language, hands clapping  
Shut the mouth. Some parts return to mind.  
A wise one sees things, and may understand them.

134



*Book*

*Five*



I fixed my heart by singing every morning to my harp,  
To what returns an answer, to chance questions:

God said:

    I change the earth  
Like people change their clothing before battle:  
I measured Shechem for a boot: It didn't fit.  
I put on Gilead, Manasseh, wore Ephraim  
As my helmet, took Judah as my swagger stick.  
I wash my hands of Moab. Edom is my bootjack.  
    I humble Philistines.

135


*Return.*
*Promise.*

Who will climb the wall first? Who will open Edom?  
God knows. When we win, we say that God is with us.  
War means death comes only from another's hand.



A pack of liars, spitting adders, sometime  
 Friends accused me of my prayers,  
 Hauled me to court, and thought  
 Because their purchased justice heard  
 The case, that I was caught.  
 Orchestrated charges' clamor could not drown  
 The oath I muttered in God's ear.  
 God is not deaf to truth, can tell  
 Good judgment from a smear.

136



I said: Lord,

*Book**Five*

Is truth auctioned to the highest  
 Bidder? Make the devil court's attorney  
 For this kangaroo judge when he comes  
 Before you. String his bartered sentences  
 Through nose-rings. Hale him living  
 Out of office. Let his life be short,  
 His widow laugh, then turn a hag,  
 A char, his orphan children cruise  
 City streets for bread. Let tax men  
 Reappraise him, creditors foreclose.  
 Hold his father's greed against him.  
 Gratify his mother's lust with strangers,  
 By an open window in full view of neighbors.  
 Crush his name to powder, rub away  
 His chalk. This man brought innocence  
 To market, has earned hatred.  
 He wears lies as his robe of justice,  
 As a tiger skin, so cinch the sash,  
 Turn blood to water, bone to wax.



Pay back my loveless friends  
One hundredfold in coin struck  
By themselves, and loaned, and spent.  
Not for my sake but because  
Your name can slow the reaching  
Shadows of an afternoon, make  
The full sun halt and blaze for me,  
My enemies' near bygone watchword  
Hardly worth a taunt.

Show your hand,

Lord, make them fear you

And an old man's verse.

137



*Return.*

*Promise.*



God said: Sit down.  
 Use your enemy's back  
 For a chair, for a hassock.  
 Read him several chapters  
 From your book of successes.

Dew beads on glazed tile.  
 Days, streets are dusty and heaped  
 With their bodies. You pause  
 At the streambed, bend, drink  
 From an eddy, look up.

138



*Book*

*Five*



Thanks to the maker of the  
Infinite, heaped particles, of  
Memory, where time —  
Escaping even as we watch a rock  
Slide rumble down the distant  
Mountain face — that groaning  
Axle of eternity, spoke of the wheel  
Knowing and forgetting. Law  
Enacted teaches pity wastes itself.  
Roaring dies. Whispered praise endures.

139

*Return.**Promise.*



Happily, one listens to what's written  
About right and wrong.  
Light sometimes takes too long to come.  
Law does not always side with good.  
Enough a person's kind and generous,  
Loves fairness more than gain or show.  
Ugly, deafened, greedy slandermongers  
Jeer, jaw, juggle for the upper hand.  
Averse to tricks, the decent one is happy.  
His haters' teeth grind even when asleep.

140

*Book**Five*



The work is never done.  
 Sunset, sunrise, sky  
 A high chair spilling  
 Light crumbs on the floor.  
 As before, we sweep them  
 Into heaps, find families  
 Where once the barren  
 Wasted time like water  
 And a mother bears.

141


*Return.*
*Promise.*



When Israel went up from Egypt,  
 A house in a house of no law with strange language,  
 The land filled its promise to Jacob.  
 The sea saw the children on foot and drew back.  
 Jordan turned aside.  
 Boulders skipped down mountainsides like rams  
 Jump, like spring lambs.

142

What quailed the sea so it fled?



What shunted Jordan?

Skipped the mountainside?

*Book*

The presence, God, which makes land pitch

*Five*

Made rock melt into standing pools,

Cliffs spout fountains.



Not for our sake, but so strangers will not say  
 Where is god?  
 In the sky? does he listen? then polish  
 Their bumpers and crystal,  
 And go right on braying, and looking not seeing:  
 These hummers with tin ears, they  
 Wrinkle their noses, grope hard under covers,  
 And stumble, and cry out:  
 They are what they worship, and fashion, and trust.

143



Admit what you can't know,  
 And can't see, and grow up  
 To fear it. Grow rich and old, less  
 Than the maker of earth and sky,  
 Gifts to the living. Give  
 Life. For what good do the dead do?  
 Can they worship, sing praises?  
 For as long as you can, live  
 And praise, live and praise.

*Return.**Promise.*



For once when I cried out somebody listened:  
 God took my complaint for a song  
 Belted at the top of my lungs  
 In a shower of troubles, good  
 Even if off key. Surrounded by death  
 Loving liars, by fires banked inside  
 My nature, I stumbled over simple things:  
 A shoe untied, the pillow never smooth,  
 A night cough, hum of strangers' tires.

144

*Book**Five*

The gift has been given. So, low but alive,  
 I said what I believed: that greed succeeds  
 Where grace cannot, that one idea can kill  
 A world of simple pleasures, cup and spoon.  
 Stir them. Don't speak quickly, savor  
 The hot cider, candied ginger on the tongue,  
 Heavy cloud shrugged off my shoulders.  
 I promise to be more than one of those  
 (What, still alive? He lived? He died?) who never  
 Show their heart or read the lips of mumblers  
 In the public record: I call upon the Lord,  
 Am called upon to praise in easy words:  
 A truth should come out plain and make good sense,  
 So truth will find a friendly audience.



Lord,  
All living  
Utter praises:  
Dead ones don't.

Or:

Heaven covers  
Yesterday with  
Morning, always:  
Now praise.

145



*Return.*

*Promise.*



Thank goodness just one god always returning.  
 Let children learn to say, "Always returning."  
 Let those who lead thought say, "Always returning."  
 Let those who've seen fear say, "Always returning."

146

*Book**Five*

I called from my narrow self:  
 The great expanse answered,  
 Said: If God is for you, what matter  
 Who hates you. Far better to trust  
 Found disorder than tugs  
 Of war, others: give up  
 To the sky, not mean men.

Surrounded, I cut off  
 Their shouts in mid-sentence, shaved  
 Fringes off whatever small point  
 They boasted: bee swarms and smoke  
 Crackling fired thorns, pinky rings,  
 Squid-sucker foreskins in heaps on the floor.

A hip-slapper.  
 Winners' tents pitch, but the fortunate  
 Dancer chose pebbles, more killing  
 Than coping stones dropped from a temple wall.  
 Shelter's how things fall out;  
 Hope is tomorrow's door.

Happy for good from the name I can't say aloud,  
 Blue hazes wind through the horns of the altar.  
 Praise for the ornament, heart plays the instrument:  
 Thank goodness just one god always returning.



## A

As though time casts no shadow,  
 We acted out the letter of the law  
 But left the heart behind, as though  
 The ocean could be stopped, be tied  
 In reasons, ropes. The waters mirror  
 Changing light, the blank expression  
 Of a face that makes no error.

## B

Born as we are from the breach, and buried  
 In the earth, we made tables  
 Of law cut in stone by your fingertip,  
 So the pages might crack but the words would not smudge,  
 Like our actions, confusion, despair  
 Of fixed meaning. Sun's glare blinds  
 The sailor, yet he hears white breakers  
 And gulls mew, scents rocks, and knows danger.

## C

Call me. I'll answer,  
 Only a visitor  
 Here among strangers  
 Who sit on their benches  
 And gossip and mutter  
 And stare at me. Tell me  
 Your secrets, the law's lore  
 In plain words, but softly.

## D

Do I talk to the earth and the sky?  
 Did they answer?

147



*Return.*  
*Promise.*



Days, they said. Nights, they sung.  
Wonder of wonders.  
Liars believe that the world is their willing:  
Dash them down  
Now, Lord, like gravity's dancers. I drink  
Understanding, and run off like water.

## E

148



*Book*

*Five*

Entering my judging heart  
I found a maze, the same  
That pleased the five-year-old  
Who threaded through.  
Now paintings, merchant hallways  
Twist inside me, though I always  
Find a window: moonlight, you  
Make it visible.

## F

First let us walk without worry:  
If kindness will come, do I need  
To answer the taunters who never  
Doubt newspaper stories, but titter  
When I talk, for saying the right  
And just thing as you teach it?  
Their fat heads suck flattery, but I eat  
Your law, food which won't make me thick.

## G

Give me rest. Give me hope. Give me  
Rest from hope.  
Worn out from watching and wanting



To see the bad  
Ground up and blown off like sawdust.  
Going to sleep  
I remember your name, waking your law.  
Does it help?

## H

Hear me now, how I swear  
From my heart that your  
Pity's no help, Lord.

You promised.  
Read your law, didn't I?  
Day and night, praising  
Leaps without lapse, Lord,  
Your promise.

149



*Return.*  
*Promise.*

## I-J

I served your good words to the pork  
Hearted liars, who spat them out. Judge them  
In their day, with my mouth, by your book.  
While jerks joke about money, paper  
Bathrooms with floral prints, teach  
Me how truth tastes, how work  
Puts forth flowers, for only the sick  
Once at heart have an inkling.

## K

Knowledge without guilt  
May not be how you made me,  
But the thought of it makes pain  
And fear more pointed, makes me



Willing to exhaust my youth  
And stand unblushing before crowds  
Of those who cannot see or hear even  
My heart's truth, much less your own.

L

Longing to hear from you, all night  
I listened

To dark jars the wind socked, eyes bleary:  
I heard

150 Speeding cars, dogs barking, horns, no hosannas:  
I said



Lies may not kill me: law written larger than life  
Is the Lord's.

*Book*

*Five*

M

Made of memory and will  
To know, we are the law's  
Unlikely servants, clay  
Clouds blown across  
The earth we're made from:  
Some thrown in others' way  
So they'll stumble, or become  
Less humbly observant.

N

Now I get it!  
Never put down understanding.  
Save God alone,  
Nothing else can help you:  
Money, power,



Man or woman, drug or teacher.

Hungry? Certain

Words taste sweet, will fill, are true.

## O

Opposite

Darkness, when lumps

Click their lamps off,

Grind molars and cry out,

I turn to your text:

Every letter a torch passed

Along generations: run

Over darkness.

151



*Return.*

*Promise.*

## P

Put it this way:

Little as I know of these worlds,

Much less what words mean, I pour

Out beakers of red wine, olive oil cruses

At those meals called for as I read the law

As we have written in your book.

Poor, any reason to ignore a letter

That won't go away.

## Q

Question you, engraver of the law,

Who by the way made mountains, air, and oceans,

Piled idols into heaps left for the ignorant

To pick from, those without the sense to fear

A whisperer whose prophets' hair stands

Straight up when they're called, who speak



With difficulty, know they won't be heard  
But hated because they speak your word? Never.

R

Right as you are, Lord,  
Spare me some assurance  
That hooters and honkers  
Won't prance it forever  
In our fallen faces, who took  
What your book said was  
Proper as truth. Ruin them  
Now, Lord. Or let me. I want to.

152



*Book*

S

*Five*

Soul, can you see how the sky's blue silk scroll,  
Read from right to left, studded with alphabet starlight,  
Can be studied the way one can drink in a face,  
Each flicker and shadow voicing an emotion?  
A script streaked with ink stained by tears of ambition,  
The play of emotion no insight no knowledge.  
I don't know another except for such outbursts.  
I look for myself while searching your law.

T

The gale blew all night, a howler  
In the trees. The ocean stood  
Up on its legs and walked white-haired  
Across the barrier beach. Driftwood houses  
Tumbled from their stilts, too near  
Land's end to stand long. Moored in sand,  
Just sea grass holds the world in place:  
Dunes for our nature, words for grass.



## U-V

Unless the end comes quickly —

    Poof! No planet —

We'll be forced to understand it as we go.

    Even nothingness won't be

    As we imagined.

Earth's shoulders shrug the mantle, towers

    Built to code careen, consuming

Knowledge from the atoms up: your sentence.

## W-X

Weeks pass. The red oak silver maple leaves

    Paint patterns underfoot. And waffle.

Green earth cools. Will winter ever come?

    Can sky break mountain fog at ten,

Icicles draped across my lips and lashes?

    Whether birth and death the weavers

Ever finish up the rug to cover us, or not,

    Your law stays. We go. X marks the spot.

## Y-Z

Yet again I called out, and you heard me:

After crowds dispersed, after keepers

Swept up, locked, and left for home, I sang

    Another solo for the Lord

    Alone.

Yes, I remember yesterday, one

Yellow wort in bloom next to the gate.

Zealous without meaning to be, jealous.





I called out to the one who heard me say,  
Save me from the plausible liars.  
What can be said to a twister of truth, someone  
Who preys upon trust, who mints coin from desire?  
Bludgeon the bastards with bricks and bats, fire  
Them, forbid them to sit on a bench in the sun.  
No matter what I say, they contradict it. I say,  
Peace, my soul wants peace. But they say, War.

154

*Book**Five*



I look to the hills and hear thunder rolls,  
 Eternity's wheel  
 Across highway and foot track:  
 Who could sleep  
 In broad daylight or moonlight,  
 At home or abroad?  
 God's the great keeper of people  
 Awake, a keeper  
     From evil, forever.

155


*Return.*
*Promise.*



My heart danced when they said, Go in:  
I stood inside the doorway to Jerusalem:  
Jerusalem, the city of the Lord of all

Creation, ruler of the law, of people  
Speaking heart to heart, where dream, word, thought,  
Justice, judgment, thanks, and praise

156     Agree, where meeting, people talk  
About Jerusalem, and talking sing of peace,  
                 Their only greeting.



*Book*

*Five*



I look to the sky, and wait  
For a hand to reach down  
Through a window, a cloud,  
And I wait. Like drought land  
Rutted, cracked with contempt  
For the easy, with scorn for the proud  
Tanning nude, we want rain.  
Tip your hand.  
We will wait.

157

*Return.**Promise.*



Without help we'd be gone:  
In a flash when the angry ones turn up their flames:  
Not a gurgle as floodwaters swallow our souls.  
Bless the Lord, for our souls  
Are those songbirds set free from the snares,  
From nets fowlers baited. Without help  
We join flocks, or alight.

158



*Book*

*Five*



As mountains ring Jerusalem  
So God surrounds the people,  
Chosen by heart, not by lot.  
They are cedars on mountains.

Wind twists the evil ones, fearful.  
High hills protect Israel.





When we returned from far away  
 Our home looked as it looks in dreams:  
 The sun shines, gates swing  
 Open of themselves, and someone  
 Sings a song we had forgotten  
 As we now remember laughter.  
 Then strangers said, Great things  
 Were done for them.

160

The Lord



Did great things for us then. A good.  
 But you must do great things again,  
 Because we live with heaviness  
 And twist and scatter like a river  
 Delta bogged in marsh and reeds.  
 We started sadly so we'd end up  
 Smiling, for anyone begins, sows  
 Seed with tears to reap his own,  
 The happy harvest, no?

*Book**Five*



Live for yourself, live for nothing:  
A city of watchers and waiters,  
Of early birds, burners of night lights, of eaters  
Of what gets dished up by the loaf and the spoonful  
Are loveless, fitful sleepers, wanting children.  
Children ransom the hostage, the happy man,  
One who grows up with them, old with them:  
Early they take to the walks; watch them later  
Stand in their doorways talking to children of strangers.

161

*Return.**Promise.*



Daughter and wife, blessings  
I never thought of alone  
In the city relying on money:

Winter sun streams on the bayberries,  
Fallow beds, orchard buds, hedge,  
Gates to the heart's Jerusalem.

162



*Book*

*Five*



"They treated me like dirt while I was growing up,"  
 Israel says. "They walked all over me.  
 They plowed my back into a fallow, furrowed field."  
 Snap their yoke, Lord. Beat the haters into thatch  
 Too dry for harvesting, unfit for brooms,  
 And make those sweeping past not know the way  
 To speak a blessing in your name.





Deep down I call out  
 To you, O God:  
 Hear me. Don't keep  
 My slips always before  
 You, before me, or who  
 Could survive here?

164 I wait for the answer  
 That's more  
 Than an echo,  
 God, harder  
 Book Than daylight,  
 Five And kinder, and longer.



I don't look too high, aiming  
To muddle big questions: still  
A small child, my soul has been weaned  
From the breast and the bottle,  
And taught to behave, understand.  
So I hope.



*Return.*  
*Promise.*



David swore he would not rest until the Ark was carried  
 Out from Obed-edom's house, where David left it,  
 Through the main gate to Jerusalem.

Levites took the Ark upon their shoulders, following  
 The dancing King of Israel, who beat his tambourine  
 And sang: Come up, come up.

Then God swore back:

166



*Book*

*Five*

Your sons and their sons' sons will sit  
 On Zion's throne:  
 Jerusalem will be my home, and when  
 Your children practice  
 My law, learn those lessons taught  
 Discerning hearts,  
 The poor shall have their bread,  
 The wise know pleasure:  
 They will sing and dance and blow the horn  
 At new year. Lamps burn  
 Oil. Your enemies will blush with rage  
 Because you flourish.



Different peoples, families at peace with one another are like  
 Oil poured atop the head that curls behind the ears and down  
     the front of Aaron's beard to his robed ankles, are like  
 Dew on Hermon, beads rolled down the sides of Zion's  
     mountains where, commanded, we chose good, and life.

167


*Return.*
*Promise.*



A scholar at his desk at midnight  
Looked up from his book, beyond the lamplight,  
Into a socked-in yard where gray wisps swirled  
Between clotheslines, and said: Blessed be the creator  
of this world.





I stood on the front porch,  
 Admired the juniper, lily bed, privet hedge screening the street.  
 This house feels separate, chosen.  
 Blue sky framed by trees seems much deeper, the sea breeze  
 More tempered than on open beach,  
 Where black clouds spit lightning, strong gusts  
 Clap waves dragging sand out, walk dunes into nothing.

The firstborn of Egypt were sucked into darkness.  
 The living remainder watched Israel's passage  
 Across empty places that did not show footprints,  
 Across famous kingdoms once mighty in Canaan:  
 Of Sihon the Amorite, of Og, King of Bashan:  
 Their land was a promise, a gift to our children.

169



*Return.*  
*Promise.*

If even a man's word lasts longer than buildings,  
 Then rumors of God have more substance than idols:  
 Stone lips speak no doctrine,  
 Gold eyes show no vision,  
 Brass ears ring no phrases,  
 Silver tongues taste no lilting  
 In praise of their maker,  
 Or makers, just like them, who trust them.

God bless Jacob's children, and listen to Aaron's:  
 Those living in cities, and parents who fear for them,  
 Speak for them, living in Zion.



Thank the Lord, there is good in life  
     Always returning  
 Thank the Lord there is just one god  
     Always returning  
 Thank the Lord there are many ways  
     Always returning  
 One who makes wondering  
     Always returning  
 One who knows sky as mind  
     Always returning  
 Set gem land in ocean rings  
     Always returning  
 Who mounted the living lights  
     Always returning  
 The sun to show daytime  
     Always returning  
 Moon and stars steering nights  
     Always returning  
 Who smote Egypt's firstborn  
     Always returning  
 Led Israel's children out  
     Always returning  
 Played strong hand at arms' length  
     Always returning  
 Who parted the Red Sea reeds  
     Always returning  
 A causeway for Israel  
     Always returning

170

*Book**Five*



But swallowed up following Pharaoh and chariots

Always returning

Whose pillar led people through desert waste

Always returning

Who toppled old kingdoms

Always returning

Who killed famous rulers,

Always returning

Crushed Sihon of Heshbon,

Always returning

Erased Og of Bashan,

Always returning

Gave their lands to our fathers,

Always returning

His children of Israel

Always returning

Who remembered us, sunken hulks

Always returning

And floated us, salvaged and

Always returning

Who finds food for all living things

Always returning

Thank the Lord there is one God, good

Always returning

171



*Return.*

*Promise.*



In Babel, where the tower fell, strangers  
Do not speak our language. We were taken  
There in chains and, captive by the rivers,  
Told to sing them songs of Zion. Crushed,  
Could we sing Hebrew praises in translation?

Even happy, when our children asked us  
Why this bread was eaten, and rehearsed  
The plagues God rained on Egypt's head, we hope  
To see Jerusalem. Jerusalem,  
My tongue would stick between my teeth,  
My right hand palsy, before I forget you.

172

*Book**Five*

Lord, remember when your city fell,  
The Chaldees chanting  
“Sack her, strip her, raze her to the ground” —  
Babylon, you jackal's daughter, happy  
Is the one to pay you back in kind:  
Who will smash your babies' heads against the rocks.



When I heard what my heart said  
 First I looked outside: Two horses  
 Trotted out stone gargoyle gates.  
 They rode away.

    If nothing's written  
 In the heart, then try the book  
 That's never blank. Enter, sound  
 Of hoofbeats. (Wood blocks clomp.)



*Return.*  
*Promise.*



Look in:  
My soul is glass  
To you, no vein  
Or bone unseen,  
But you know  
All I pass through,  
All I do, ahead  
Or inside me,  
Before I do.  
I can't tell  
What you don't  
Prompt my tongue  
To say, no matter what  
The thought: no cloak  
So thick, no parcel  
Of the sky (if I  
Made wings this morning),  
No ditch, no deep  
(Were I to dive  
Or dig) so dark  
That your hand could not  
Find me, touch me,  
Seize me, raise me  
Gasping, flashing  
Scales to the light.  
My soul's a tiny  
You, my bones your  
Bread baked in ovens  
Buried under foot,

174

*Book**Five*



My days unreeled  
Film you took in  
At a glance before  
I lived them. If my songs  
Outnumbered sea grass  
Grown on sand dunes  
Inching inland from the margin,  
They would count less  
Than a comma, than a swash  
Stroked in your book. Both  
Of and with you, have I ever  
Cottoned to bad ones  
Lugging bags of goods,  
Who worship their bodies,  
Who lie and act tasteful?  
I think not. I hate them  
And refuse their cash,  
Their compliments, their statuettes  
And solemn uniforms.  
Peer through the glass,  
Lord, know me, show  
Me a right way to walk  
My watch on your part  
In the daylight, into night.

175



*Return.*

*Promise.*



Violence, slander, snakes  
Spit poison, gossip, forked  
Tongues plot war.

Don't let them trip me up  
On my own laces or  
In pits they've dug.

176 I said, Hear me, God.  
Don't make my words sound  
Empty. Keep me



*Book*

*Five*

Living, rain hot lava  
On their flat heads, scorch  
Shut drivels lips.

Wipe bully-smeared dung from  
Your face. Just flick it off.  
Leave us. Be praised.



Smoke whispers up the landlocked sky.  
 Come early, Lord, come sooner:  
 Nodding heads snap to attention at the rapped  
 Desk, where a beam of sunlight  
 Holds its chalkline to the globe. Once bones  
 Were bound in cords, stacked,  
 Strewn by stokers, scattered like white dandelion  
 Seeds, made chalk or lime.  
 A fowler's twig. Dear God, next time take  
 Grackles only in their net.

177


*Return.*
*Promise.*



I said the thing out loud  
And to the Lord.  
I bowed down, I complained  
About my troubles:

When I was lost, and did not know  
Where to turn  
Away from traps the plotters set  
Along my way,

178



Just breathing was an act of will.  
Look right or left:

*Book*

All, all alone in danger,

*Five*

Grown a stranger  
To ones who knew me once.  
An orphaned soul,  
I raised my voice to you:

O Lord, my help  
And place among the living,  
Hear me.  
I am lower than the least  
Of those who wait  
Upon my happy enemies.  
Let my soul  
Out of this cage, so I can freely  
Sing your name  
In company with friends, in truth.  
Your hand is open.



I can't cry innocent in any court:  
 Dogged by enemies, I ran, was caught.  
 Pitched in a hole, my soul turned waste,  
 Heart hollow rock not even wind might whistle through.  
 Did darkness, when the universe was torn from you  
     Into its being, long for nothing?

Hurry. Faces of the long departed, dim and empty,  
 Peer up from the pit. I said, "The sun will rise tomorrow.  
 I will see it." Will I? Keep me and my spirits spinning  
 Level at the rim until the hateful clatter echoless  
 Down their appointed slot. Then keep me longer:  
     No good likeness when I am not.

179

*Return.**Promise.*



My fingers twang the bowstring.  
Arrows flying from the tower  
Land whole armies at my feet.

What is one human,  
That God should know or care about him or his children?  
Steam clouds, shadows in the air.  
Lightning makes the mountains smoke;

180 Broken sunlight, rainbows.  
Nock your shafts, Lord, fix



*Book*

*Five*

Those strangers speaking languages  
With no word for truth,  
Who hold one hand out, fingers crossed behind their back.  
Teach me to pluck the heartstring, sing  
Like David did before  
Those strangers speaking languages  
With no word for truth.  
Set our sons in glazed  
Enamelled tile patterns, inlaid  
Daughters, walls and pillars.  
Keep our pantries stocked with meat, fruit, grain, and drink.  
Let no guest uninvited, come,  
Nor welcomed, go.  
When miseries shout in the street,  
Take them in hand.



Allow us,  
Blessed  
Creator,

Dancing  
Exits,  
Free from

Gravity  
(Heaven  
Is just

Knowing  
Life less  
Matter);

Operatic  
Passions'  
Quavers;

Reason's  
Slender  
Tapers;

Unstaged vigils'  
Waxy  
Zeal.

181



*Return.*

*Promise.*



Just being, being born, just crossing  
From the wings, however long, is praise.  
On stage I thought, spoke, sung, alone, before  
A hall packed by an audience of one.  
Practice made us help and hope for heaven.  
Time and all that's in them keep the weak,  
Bent, put-upon alive to promises like justice.  
Part the curtain. Nations slip out between phrases  
On the coral lips of oceans breaking over reefs,  
Earth square and settled under winter rain.

182

*Book**Five*



But the Lord rebuilds Jerusalem,  
Collects the scattered, cast-off, brokenhearted  
Seed of Israel and knows how many  
Stars there are, and calls them all  
By name, and hears the answer.  
We can't describe how music works  
Or know the time of clouds, rain, mountain grass.  
Cattle graze there, crows pick  
Through what horses leave behind.  
A rider strong enough to pass through air  
Needs more than skill to master fear.  
When earth becomes Jerusalem, praise  
Doors that keep the north wind out,  
Your children warm inside, with bread, fruit  
Of the plain unrolling thunder, tables  
Where wool snow blankets ashes, frost  
Nips hail-sown buds of cold. A glance.  
They melt, soft breezes streaming water.  
Only we have heard it, and retell it.

183

*Return.**Promise.*



We people are more  
Recent than creation's rumor.  
Aimless desert nomad shepherds' children,  
Island in a sea of nations, reading dreamers  
Steered by whispers, we stand on years  
Eternity a moment, then disappear.

184

Time's two hands, give and take,  
Hold fire and ice and clay and darkness,  
Everything you can imagine, and make

*Book**Five*

Lions of our own device. But not alone,  
O Lord. We play short rags on dragon deeps,  
Raised by the stories that were always old, gone  
Days past telling sung to you as praise, for keeps.



New song? Nearly. Better  
 Hums through a kazoo than fancy fretwork  
 Strums to dazzle children.  
 Echoes in the shower, muffled bedroom  
 Cries: a two-edged sword:  
 It cuts the mute and those who should know better.  
 Writers without spirit  
 Cannot even praise the letter truly.

185


*Return.*
*Promise.*



Vaulted ceilings echo, raise  
The trumpet, organ, ram's horn,  
Harp and lute for finger dancers,  
Tambourine, bowed viols, buzzing  
Double reeds, flutes, clapping cymbals,  
Drumbeats, singing, humming, breathing  
Close to what they praise.

